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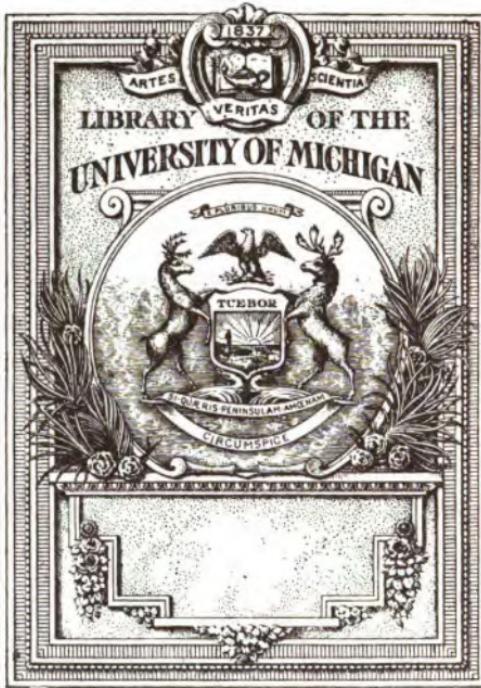
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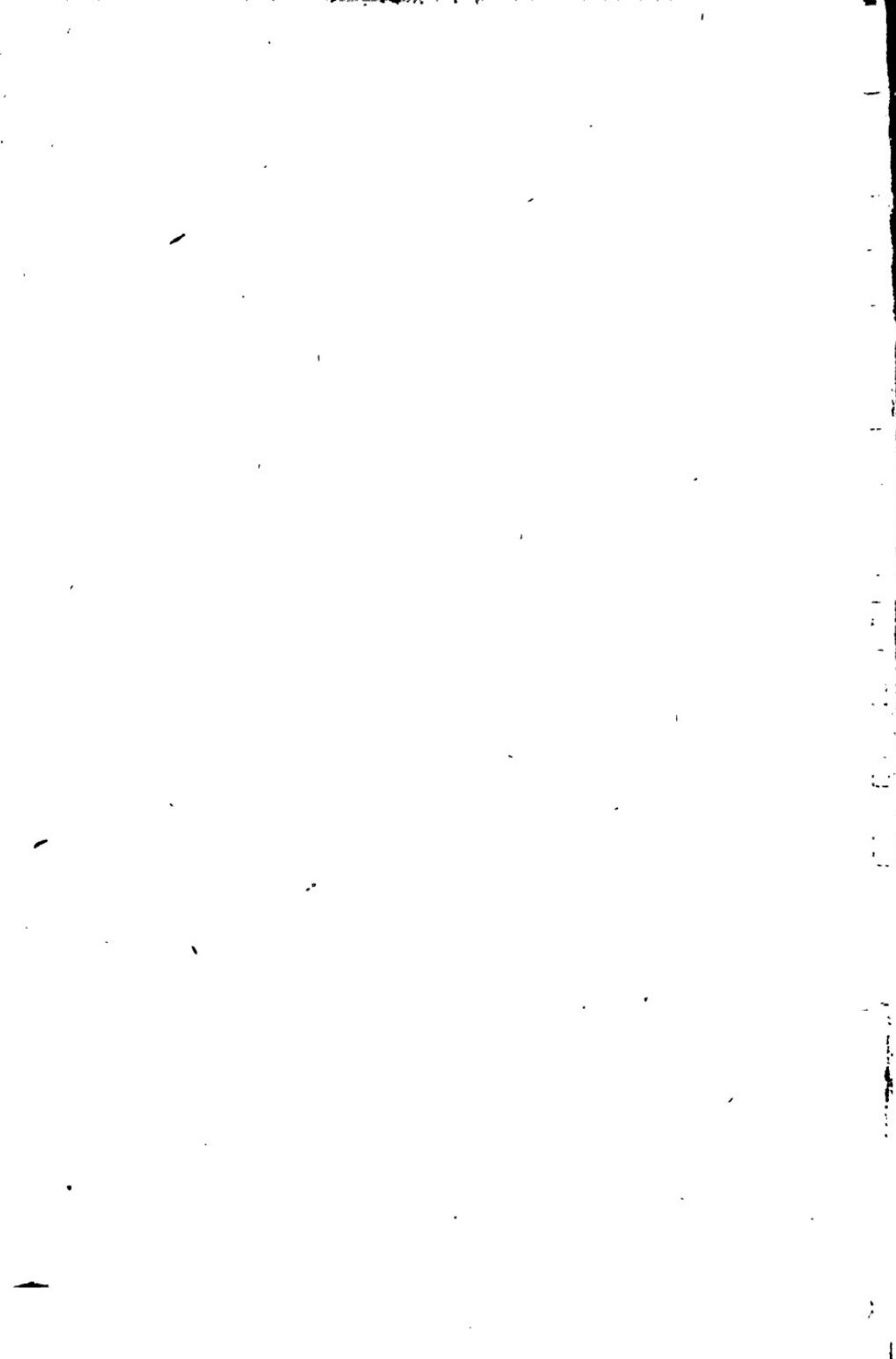
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**LETTERS TO HIS WIFE**

*BY THE SAME AUTHOR*

**WAR POEMS**

**NOVELS**

**THE PURSUIT OF MR FAVIEL**

**MERIEL OF THE MOORS**

**THE JUDGMENT OF ILLINGBOROUGH**

**THE JUNE LADY**

**BOOKS OF TRAVEL**

**AN IGNORANT IN INDIA**

**THE FAIR DOMINION**

1  
2  
3  
4

200



R. G. Verma

# LETTERS TO HIS WIFE



R.<sup>obert</sup>  
E.<sup>rnest</sup><sup>BY</sup>  
VERNÈDE  
=

LONDON: 48 PALL MALL  
W. COLLINS SONS & CO. LTD.  
GLASGOW MELBOURNE AUCKLAND

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O U S / M

## INTRODUCTION

My first idea in printing my husband's letters was to have them, in a complete and more convenient form, for private circulation among those few intimate friends and relations to whom I had sent copies of each letter as it arrived. During the last few weeks, however, I have been asked by so many people to have his letters published, that I have at last decided to let them appear as they now do. But I do this very hesitatingly. To those who knew my husband, and who know his writings, no apology is needed. To others I feel I should like to give some explanation. The letters were written under very great difficulties. How great, I think, few people can realise without having known the man.

He was French by descent, his branch of the Vernède family being Huguenots, who left southern France in 1685 at the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, and emigrated to Holland and then to England. His horror of cold and damp I always thought was due to his southern French blood;

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## INTRODUCTION

it was such a real and physical thing. He could stand any amount of heat, but the cold, especially damp cold, seemed positively to numb him. It still seems almost incredible to me how he survived those two awful winters in the trenches. And it must be remembered that he was over forty, doing 2nd lieutenant's work with boys mostly about half his age.

The spelling of the letters also made me rather doubtful. It was a trick of his always to mis-spell certain words in writing or mis-pronounce them in talking. They are all of them family words, generally with a story attached. At first I thought of spelling the words properly, but in many cases this seemed to make the sentences so much more pompous that I have kept them as they were originally written, and can only hope they will not strike any one as either affected or irritating.

Before he went out to France I made him promise that he would tell me everything just as he thought of it and not try to make things out better than they were. He kept that promise, and I think it was a help to him to feel that he could say things just as they occurred to him, though once or twice he was doubtful as to whether he was worrying me by telling me too much. But I repeatedly assured him that my imagination was quite vivid enough to invent the things if he did not tell them to me. And I think he was convinced of it.

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A short sketch of his life up to 1914 may be of interest to some people.

Robert Ernest Vernède was born in London, June 4, 1875. He went to St Paul's School, won the Milton prize in 1893, for an original English poem, and a classical exhibition at St John's College, Oxford, in the following year. He took Greats in 1898.

On leaving Oxford he lived at home in London and took up writing as a profession. He began by writing articles and short stories. His first novel, *The Pursuit of Mr Faviel*, was published in 1905. It was very successful, and has since been republished by Nelson's in their 7d. edition, and, under the title of *The Flight of Faviel*, in America. It was followed by *Meriel of the Moors*, (1906); *The Judgment of Illingborough* (1908), and *The June Lady* (1911). A book about two boys, called *The Quietness of Dick*, written some time earlier, appeared in America in the same year. He also wrote for some years for *Black and White*, and later for the *Bystander*. But his two books of travel, *An Ignorant in India* and *The Fair Dominion*, both published in 1911, and some short stories for *Harper's Magazine* and *Blackwood's Magazine*, were, I think, what he most enjoyed writing, and poetry he always loved to write.

His first war poem, 'England to the Sea,'

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appeared in the *Times* of August 7, 1914. He wrote several more in the next few weeks, and after that he wrote occasionally when he had a little quiet time. After being wounded, and while down in Sheppey, November, 1916, he finished 'Before the Assault,' which he had had in his mind for some time and which he mentioned in his letter of March 1, 1916. It was published in the *Observer* of December 17, 1916. Two other poems mentioned in his letters were 'The Sergeant,' published in the *Daily Chronicle*, August 31, 1916, and 'A Petition,' published in the *Times* of May 5, 1917, a month after his death. These he wrote in the trenches in the summer of 1916 and sent home to me in a manuscript book before he went into action on the Somme. When his kit came back from France after his death, I found two more poems that he had written or finished since he went out in December, 1916, 'At Delville' and 'A Listening Post'; they are included in the collection of his poems recently published by Messrs. Heinemann.

His poems brought him appreciation from all parts of the world, and since his death I have had many other kind letters which show his influence was far greater than we knew. I should like especially to mention a letter I have had from Canon H. D. Rawnsley. He wrote saying he had never met my husband, but that he had read his

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poems with very great pleasure, and had expected great things from him if he had been spared. He also sent a sonnet which appears on another page.

In 1902 we were married, and came to live in Hertfordshire in the depth of the country. He loved the country life and became an enthusiastic gardener. He was also a keen lawn tennis player, and took a great deal of trouble in making a good tennis lawn, besides planning and making the whole garden out of a piece of waste land which was covered with nettles and scrap iron when we took the house. He hated English winters, and we always tried to go away in the winter, instead of in the summer when our garden was at its best. One winter we travelled in Holland, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland. And another winter we spent a month in Switzerland. He enjoyed the sunny cold—or at all events the *sun* part of it,—but decided that on the whole he liked warm climates better. Another winter we spent in Pau, where we played much tennis. But the winter that he enjoyed most was when we went to India and spent three months with his brother, who was a Collector in Bengal. He revelled in the climate and was much interested in the people. On our return he wrote some articles in *Blackwood's Magazine*, and later published the book already mentioned, *An Ignorant in India*. He was much gratified by the appreciation of this book by

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Anglo-Indians. Only about two years ago his brother's wife in India met the Adjutant of one of the Indian regiments, who, on hearing her name, asked if she was any relation of R. E. Vernède. He went on to say that *An Ignorant in India* was 'a Classic in the Mess,' and they made every newcomer read it.

He went to Canada for a three months' trip in the autumn of 1910, and after his return he wrote *The Fair Dominion*. I was unable to go. This was the only time we were separated during the whole of our married life until the war began, except for a fortnight's walking tour he took in Portugal in May, 1914, about which some articles appeared in the *Bystander*.

When war was declared my husband was four years over age, but after reading 'The Call,' which he wrote a few days after war began, I knew he felt that he must go.

He tried to enlist several times, but was refused because of his age; at last, on September 4, he enlisted in the Universities and Public Schools Brigade of the Royal Fusiliers. Even there he was nearly refused because of his age. He was determined to join, but he would not mis-state his age. He gave his age as 39, but they wrote it down as 35 and accepted him.

The brigade—4000—assembled in Hyde Park on September 18. They marched to Victoria Station and went down to Epsom by train.

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They were billeted all over the town, and he was lucky enough to get a very pleasant billet, where I was able to join him at the end of November. I was there until the middle of March, 1914, when the men went out of billets into huts in Woodcote Park.

Before enlisting he had been advised by many friends to take a commission, but as he knew nothing of soldiering he would not hear of it. However, after some months of training he had become convinced that he would be more useful as an officer, and applied for a commission. His greatest friend, F. G. Salter — the 'Frdk.' mentioned so often in the letters—had enlisted at the same time. They were at Epsom together, took their commissions in the Rifle Brigade at the same time, and went out to France together. They had been at school together from the age of nine, and were up at Oxford at the same time. It was a bitter disappointment to my husband that he and Frdk. were not attached to the same battalion when they got to France, but when, a few weeks later, the latter was seriously wounded and returned to England unfit for active service my husband felt it a real relief, as he wrote to me, that his life was safe.

He had already had one disappointment on getting his commission. A close friend of Epsom days, J. H. Vaughan, who had applied for a commission at the same time and for the same regiment,

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had not been gazetted to the Rifle Brigade, but to the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers.

Robert was gazetted to the 5th battalion The Rifle Brigade on May 14, 1915 (the 13th anniversary of our wedding day). He went down to the Isle of Sheppey a few days later, and was again lucky in getting a pleasant place where he could be billeted, and where I joined him. We were there until November 18, 1915, when he went out to France.

The letters tell the rest of his military career up to April 9, 1917, and the following letter completes it. It is from Captain Spurling :

'DEAR MRS VERNÈDE,

'You will before this have had the official notification that your husband died of wounds on the morning of the 9th between the First Aid Station and Dressing Station. It is with the greatest regret that I have to report his death, as we all admired him immensely, and although senior to me both in age and term of service, never for a second made me feel it.

'He was in charge of his platoon on our advance and went forward with a Yorkshire officer, who was in charge of the Coy. on his right, with his Sgt. and Cpl. and a couple of his men, and as far as I can gather, came right on top of an enemy machine gun and was very seriously wounded. His men got him back to the Aid Station, but he

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did not survive the journey on from there.

'I did not see him personally after he was hit, but his Corporal, who looked after him, said his last words to him were: "Send my love to my wife."

'Please accept my sincerest sympathy with you both from myself and his brother officers in your irreparable loss.

'Always ready to help and most thoughtful for others, he will indeed be a great loss to us. In my opinion he should have had command of a company long ago, but joined us just after promotions had been made.

'His grave is in the French cemetery of Lechelle, and yesterday we put up a new cross, and put stones round the grave and planted out a large bowl of daffodil bulbs which we had flowering in the mess when we were here together some days ago.'

Robert was decidedly French in appearance —very dark, with an oval face and the most beautiful smile I have ever seen. His voice was low and soft and peculiarly pleasant; it was in its way a counterpart of the ease which characterised all his physical actions, and I think reflected his mental outlook too. Every child and every animal loved him.

The youthfulness of his appearance was quite extraordinary, and we had many amusing episodes from it. I remember once while on a short walking tour between the Rhine and the Moselle, we

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arrived at a small village one day and stopped at the inn for lunch. Our host came and sat with us, smoking a long pipe and chatting as we ate. He spoke German, and kept on addressing my husband, who did not know the language well. I explained, saying, 'Mein Mann spricht nicht viel Deutsch.' He looked quickly at us both and said in amazement, 'Ihr Herr Gemahl?' I said 'yes.' He looked again and said with true German curiosity, 'Ah, younger than you are.' I said firmly, No, he was older. But his interest was not to be quenched, and he tried to guess the age, beginning at least ten years too young; when he reached the correct age, he was so utterly amazed that he apparently believed it to be true. I think he felt we should never have invented anything so incredible.

While we were in Sheppey one of the subalterns having just found out my husband's age, pointed at him in the Mess and said to the rest of the room, 'Guess how old this man is.' Most of them guessed 28 or 29. One man, probably feeling himself very clever, said daringly, '35.' The Subaltern's joy at being able to say 40 was great. I mention these incidents as they explain his jokes about his age, and what he meant when he said that he must be 'ageing visibly' because they guessed him as being 32.

He was very quiet and reserved with people he did not know well, though a great talker with

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people who interested him. His second Captain in the Batt. in writing to me said, 'We so often in C Coy. were given, usually most unexpectedly, some extraordinarily sound and what must have been well-thought-out ideas with reference to tactical or disciplinary or other Army matters.' 'Usually most unexpectedly' exactly describes him. He would sometimes sit, smoking quietly, for nearly half an hour while other people talked, and then suddenly say something which showed that nothing had escaped him. A friend, writing of him, said:

'Two things endure with me. One is that many as his high qualities have been—his writing, his physical grace, his tender heart, his good taste, his good humour, and so forth—what was so distinctive was the congruity of the whole. Everything fitted in so beautifully that it was a delight to be with him in any mood or any surroundings.

'The other thing is that silent as he appeared to many, he had the true gift of conversation as so few have. He would tackle a subject, and keeping the other person with him in a manner so different from the mere sayer of bright things and in a manner so much more tender than the Socratic one, he would stick to it until one had reached down to the essence of the problem and felt on surer ground than one had ever done before.'

I will end this short introduction by quoting the note which appeared after his death in the

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*Pauline*, the magazine of his old school, and which was contributed by his old friend, Mr. G. K. Chesterton :

'The death of Robert Ernest Vernède, who fell fighting as a Lieutenant of the Rifle Brigade in the great advance on the Western Front, while so heavy a loss for those of us who loved him, may well be felt by the many more who admired him as something like a gain; an addition or completion to that new and shining company of poets whose patriotism turned them into soldiers, and gave them a life and death more worthy of a legend; those poets who have become poems. He had indeed other strings to his lyre, or labours for his pen; his books of travel and criticism had already revealed his appetite for adventure both material and mental; his novels had embodied romances other than his own. Tragedy itself cannot eclipse the gaiety of that farce in the grand style, *The Pursuit of Mr Favel*, the reading of which was like a holiday, not to say a honeymoon. It was perhaps the one work of our generation which was genuinely full of the April foolery of *The Wrong Box*. But his poetry will necessarily be the note that vibrates longest in the memory, especially for those most affected by his end. In the first days of the war we read that address of 'England to the Sea,' lines of which really had what a good critic has called, in another good poet, 'the gesture of magnificence' :

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'Say, thou, who hast watched through ages that are  
lengthless,  
Whom have I feared, and when did I forget ?'

This alertness, even in a literary sense, was typical of his conduct throughout; he was in this also early in the field—as he was in the battlefield. He went to the war of his own will, when past military age; he went to it a second time when he had been wounded and might easily have been excused. On the second venture he was killed. I write of such things in words altogether weak and unworthy; but it is at least natural to me to be writing them in the *Pauline*, for, though I am proud to think our friendship was never broken, it is as a Pauline that I still picture him most vividly. Many personal accidents accentuate the feeling; not least the fact that he always remained, even in face and figure, almost startlingly young. There went with this the paradox of a considerable maturity of mind, even in boyhood; a maturity so tranquil and, as it were, so solitary as to be the very opposite of priggishness. He had a curious intellectual independence; I remember him maintaining, in our little debating club, that Shakespeare was overrated; not in the least impudently or with any foreshadowing of a Shavian pose, but rather like a conscientious student with a piece of Greek of which he could not make sense. He was too good a man of letters not to have learnt better afterwards; but the thing had a touch of

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intangible isolation that surprised the gregarious mind of boyhood. He had in everything, even in his very appearance, something that can only be called distinction; something that might be called, in the finer sense, race. This was perhaps the only thing about him, except his name and his critical temper, that suggested something French. I remember his passing a polished and almost Meredithian epigram to me in class: it was, I regret to say, an unfriendly reflection on the French master, and even on the French nation in his person; but I remember thinking, even at the time, that it was rather a French thing to do. There was a certain noble contradiction in his life and death that there was also in his very bearing and bodily habit. No man could look more lazy and no man was more active, even physically active. He would move as swiftly as a leopard from something like sleep to something too unexpected to be called gymnastics. It was so that he passed from the English country life he loved so much, with its gardening and dreaming, to an ambush and a German gun. In the lines called 'Before the Assault,' perhaps the finest of his poems, he showed how clear a vision he carried with him of the meaning of all this agony and the mystery of his own death. No printed controversy or political eloquence could put more logically, let alone more poetically, the higher pacifism which is now resolute to dry up at the fountainhead

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the bitter waters of the dynastic wars, than the four lines that run :

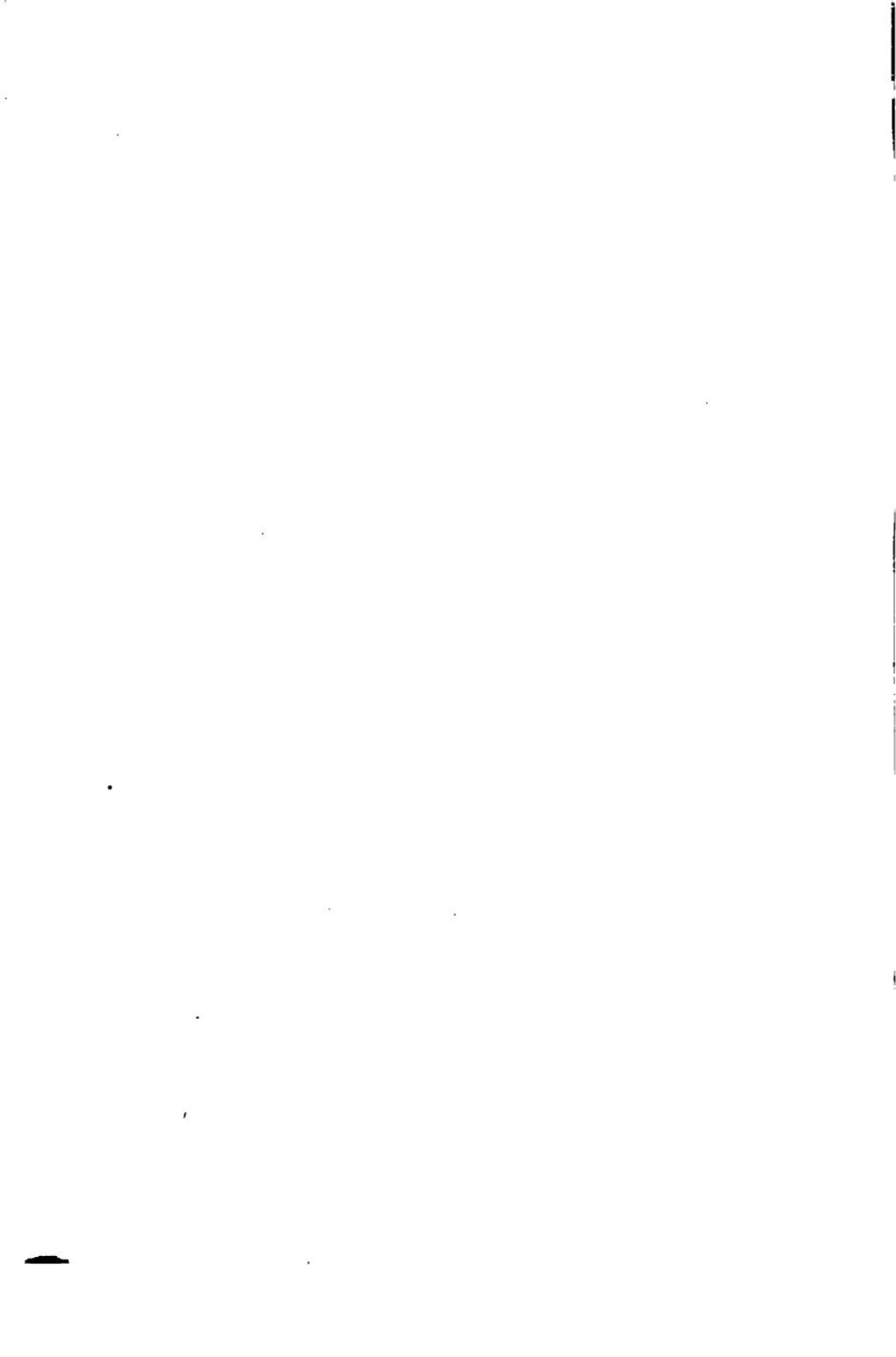
'Then to our children there shall be no handing  
Of fates so vain, of passions so abhor'd . . . . .  
But Peace . . . the Peace which passeth understanding . . .  
Not in our time . . . but in their time, O Lord.'

The last phrase, which has the force of an epigram,  
has also the dignity of an epitaph; and its truth  
will remain.'

C. H. VERNÈDE.

THE PAPER MILL,  
STANDON, HERTS.

*August, 1917.*

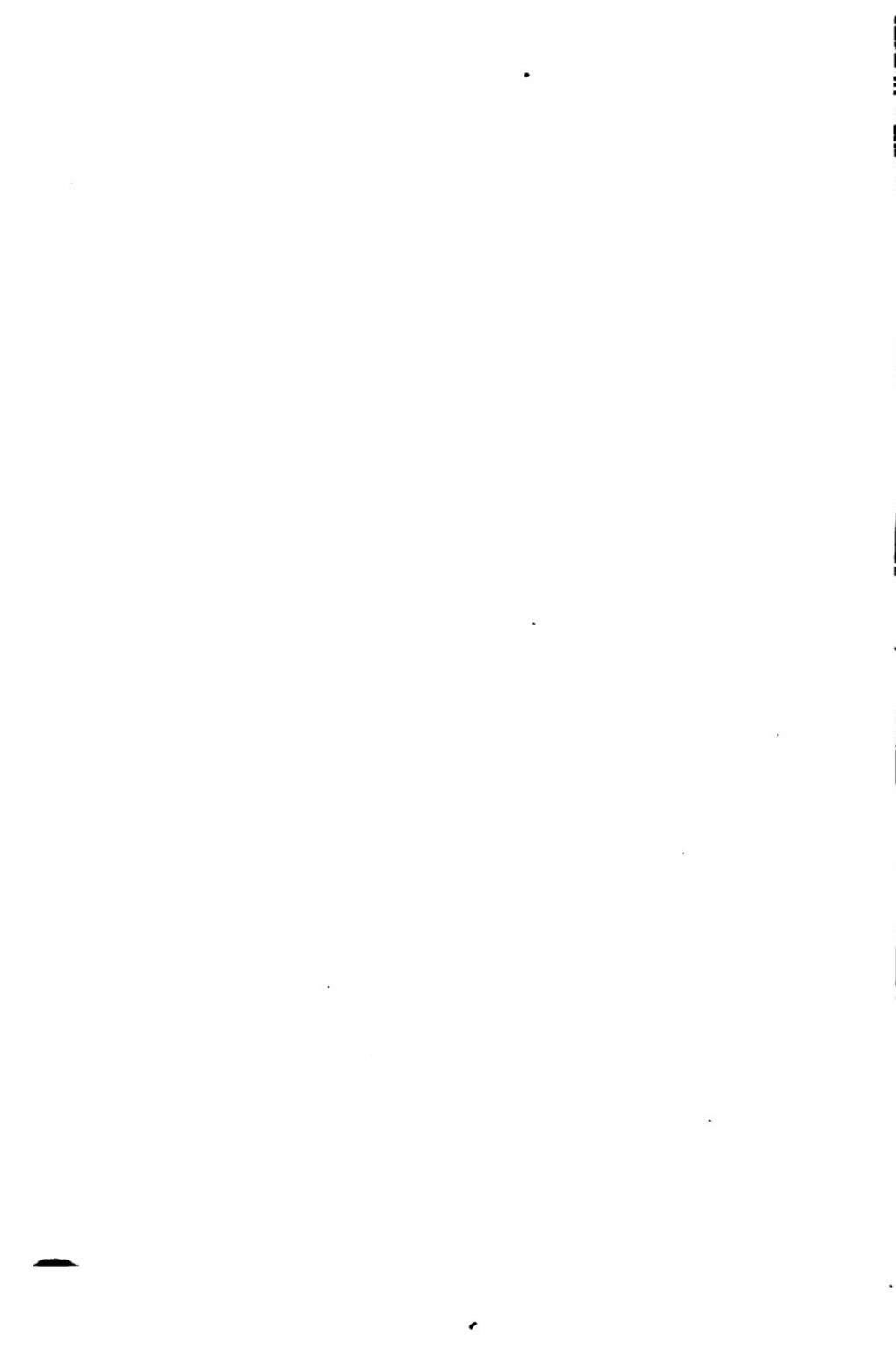


IN MEMORIAM  
ROBERT ERNEST VERNÈDE  
RIFLE BRIGADE  
Died of wounds in France  
April 9, 1917.

---

'Unversed in war,' but not unskilled of pen,  
You who heard England calling to the sea,  
Who knew the things that keep us great and free,  
Who felt Right's cause with Honour amongst men,  
Mercy and Truth, had given the heart of ten  
To those who fought tho' death alone was fee,  
You who bade all the fallen at rest to be  
Seeing the end they fell for was in ken—  
Peace and the power to live as no man's slave,  
Secure from tyranny of the War-Lord's hell;  
Sleep ! for the dream you dreamed shall yet  
be true;  
You gave your best to her whose best to you  
Was given; your prayer is answered, from your  
grave  
Sounds out ' I died for England, All is well.'

H. D. RAWNSLEY.



# Letters to His Wife

FOLKESTONE, November 18, 1915.

Somewhere at Folkestone, in the dark, the train having stopped for about an hour and a half. It is now 5.30 p.m. H.<sup>1</sup> and I have eaten a tea of tongue sandwiches and brandy and water. F.<sup>2</sup> and A.<sup>3</sup> are asleep. It is much warmer and drizzling. 8 o'clock—just starting for pier !

SOMEWHERE, Friday, November 19.

This is written at 10.30 a.m. in a small café where the subaltern draft is drinking coffee and writing after an extremely prolonged crossing. We got across by 10 p.m. Hideous wind blowing—crowded boat—and lingered on the quay till 1.15 a.m. when we got a train as far as this, which is a base camp among the sand dunes, which we reached about 2.30 (to-day), finally getting to bed on the ground in tents with some dished-out Army blankets at 4.30. It really was very amusing,

<sup>1</sup> 2nd Lieut. R. E. T. Huddart, The Rifle Brigade, killed in action, 30th June, 1916.

<sup>2</sup> 2nd Lieut. F. G. Salter, The Rifle Brigade. See introduction.

<sup>3</sup> 2nd Lieut. G. H. G. Anderson, M.C., The Rifle Brigade. See p. 151.

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though, and more 'characteristic' than anything I have struck. Jolly cold and freezing all round. We aren't a bit settled for writing, but I think we are here for a few days anyway, and have, in fact, arranged to mess together at a restaurant at five fr. a day. These youths are very pleasant, and if F. and I can get in the same Bn. (with H. and A. perhaps) it will be very well.

Address doubtful, and will probably change before you reply to this.

*Saturday, November 20.*

(Written on hotel paper headed—GRANDE PLACE A  
ETAPLES, PAS DE CALAIS, but erased.)

Still at Base camp, not knowing when we move on. We mess together, the nine of us, in the Railway Buffet, not at all bad, and share two tents, jolly cauld. It freezes at night and thaws slightly by day, but in my valise last night I was pretty warm and F. never slept better. We are near the sea, among the sand dunes and pines, very nice winter country because it's not wet or muddy. This café pen makes me write like F. I hope you will be able to read it.

This morning we marched out a couple of miles and threw a bomb or two and marched back again : lecture this afternoon.

This altogether is rather a halfway house sort of

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

place and one feels rather strayed on the passage; and not knowing at what moment one will move on is rather annoying, but it's not without humour. I told you, didn't I, that we had the pleasure of carrying our own valises several times for some distance. We left them under cover eventually at the station on a seat, but when they were brought up by the transport they had been dragged through pools of water. I should have liked to give the transport fifty days C.B.

Till we get to the trenches I can't give you a proper address—and it's no good trying to settle down to write a proper letter because I can't in this slack sort of hustle.

*Sunday, November 21.*

We haven't been posted yet. Last night was bitly cold; we shaved in our one tin between 5 and 8 a.m. Roll call at 10, after which F., H., A., and I went for a walk to a place called Flecic, where we lunched in the Inn by a nice hot stove, and were swindled into paying four frcs. for it by a stout old Frenchwoman without shame. Never in her life, I should say, had she had two frcs. before for such a *déjeuner*, and these things are not calculated to make a lasting *entente*. The village where we lunched was filled with a Canadian ammunition column run by a Major from Montreal

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

with whom we chatted. He and his officers were billeted at the chateau belonging to Count somebody and seemed very pleased with themselves —nice men.

Still very fit and go about in my fur all day. F. wears nothing and looks like an icicle. Apparently there is no chance of arranging our Bn., so if F. and I get together it will be pure luck. We would like H. and A. as well.

This is written in part of a hut where the men are singing, one small end being reserved for officers, of whom there are now hundreds here —why, nobody knows. The tent is a grisly squash, and I have not washed yet, to speak of. I made tea there about an hour ago in my canteen, which seems to go well. Several Epsomites here.

*Monday, November 22.*

We have just returned from a lecture on sandbags, not bad, by a Major who this morning took us in Battalion Drill of pre-Zulu days and then told off most of the officers on parade (all the Rifle Brigade except F.) for not appearing in Sam Brownes. How to win the War? We are a rum folk.

The routine at this place seems to remain the same—parade in the morning, lecture in the afternoon. Most of the officers, we were told, were to

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

be posted to-day, but only a few to the front, which leaves things as vague as ever. Meanwhile we are not given rations and have to feed ourselves at the rate of about nine francs a day. However, I was warm last night, in spite of a fairly hard frost, which looks well for the future. We all hope we shall get away from here, as it is pigging it without any necessity. I mean to get a bath to-night if it's possible. The worst of the place is the nowhere to sit and general overcrowding. It's either this (Y.M.C.A. Hut) or a café, which latter costs money. Frdk. is reading Henry James on a stiff chair in a very bad light. I am going to find a bath.

*November 23.*

It's begun to be misty moisty (5.30 p.m.) and we have just heard that — and — are posted to another Bn. and go off at 3.30 a.m. to-morrow morning, and the rest of us are likely to go at much the same time elsewhere. That, however, may be the usual rumour, and I will keep this till the last mo. and then write on envelope or somewhere probable address, and you must write quick to me.

I am much afraid that F. and I won't get together, but you never know.

24. Am appointed and go off to-night. Of course F. and H. are in the 2nd. Never mind.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*November 24.*

We had such a night—officers being shouted for and going off at all hours; rain at intervals coming into the tent; F. and H. departing at 2.30 a.m., ourselves at 5.30, as far as the railway siding, when it was discovered gradually that the train would not be in till 8 o'clock. So we went off and routed till we roused a Café there to give us breakfast. Since then we have travelled through various places for about six hours, finally being turned out here to change trains at 4 p.m. We have therefore had lunch and shaved in the kitchen of the Café Vasseur—quite a friendly Inn, where I write. We don't in the least know whether we shall arrive at the Bn. and the trenches to-night or not.

Just off to train—must finish later.

9 p.m. Have arrived—been posted to C Coy. and had dinner. But first of all I've got what you will think good news, I expect, which is that the Bn. is out of the trenches altogether for a month, taking a rest, so that for that period you need not worry yourself one little bit. Personally, I think I shall find resting in the Army out here rather a nuisance.

There are about seven officers to the Coy., and we are billeted together in a farm-house, moderately dirty, in a village which I have not seen yet as we only walked in in the dark; but there is much mud.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

25. We changed our billets this morning and are now in a village four miles away from the other —four in a room in a picturesque enough farm-house, with its pond and farmyard in the middle, the house and out buildings built round it in a quadrangle. The men are in the out buildings, in straw, not at all uncomfortable, I should say. We sleep on the floor in empty rooms. I would rather have gone into the trenches, as here, again, one has the outsider's feeling, the others having all done it except oneself.

*Still November 25.*

There is nothing doing to-day, and one of us is 'in billets' while the rest are out, and that happens to be me, so I may as well chat, though I don't think there is much to tell here. Apparently the time here is going to be very much the same as at Minster, and except that I have to censor my platoon (No 12's) letters, I don't expect to find it very amusing. Making a whole circle of entirely new acquaintances at this time does not add to the amenities of war, and not having got with F. still annoys. I expect I shall grouse for some little time but you must not mind that.

I haven't seen the village yet, but they say there is not a shop in it even to buy matches at. Luckily I got a rather poor pipe lighter in

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

Etaples, with which practice will no doubt make perfect.

The mess food in the middle of these excellent French housewives is cooked apparently by Army cooks—and resembles it. (Grouse.)

I might possibly get time, but doubt it, to finish off some poems.

26. Very cheery to-day—nice and bright. People not bad. Send me some socks and a good towel when you can.

*November 28, 1915.*

The time passes in a manner neither pleasant nor unpleasant, but simply of no particular interest to me, I suppose because one has no personal control of things, which never did suit me. It is freezing pretty hard, and I should think there would be skating if such things were to be done. Instead we spend our days (except Sunday, to-day, when there is nothing doing) as follows:—

6.30 a.m. Rise. (Horrible.)

7.30. Breakfast. (Porridge and bacon and eggs dryly cooked.)

8.30-9.30. Squad drill with the sergeant-major.

10-10.45. Parade with our platoons for musketry practice.

11-12. Sergeant-major again.

12.30. Lunch.

After lunch we are supposed to supervise our

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platoons at some form of exercise, such as cross country running, football, etc.

Football, if you please, is compulsory for the officers, so yesterday you might have seen me playing sokker for the first time in my life at the age of 40 with men who really play it quite well, and me not even knowing the rules. It's very absurd: however, being fairly nimble I don't think I made so considerable a fool of myself as I might have done, and anyhow, the day before I found I could easily outrun most, if not all, of my platoon, with the possible exception of the platoon sergeant—a nice man and a great athlete. Most of the elderly men (of over 34 !) simply give up and have to be coerced.

I suppose I am imagined to be about 28, and I think I shall not reveal the truth this time, as I don't fancy elderly subalterns are much appreciated.

I imagine this Bn. represents typical Regular Army, as far as you can get it now, and is, so far, more interesting than what one has seen, but I do think the whole thing is too undemocratic, and distinctions of rank demoralise human relations. I do hope Frdk. is not too much revolted by it and hasn't been forced to play sokker. I expect, however, that he is in the trenches, and I wish this Bn. had been.

This is all very stodgy, but that's what I become, you know, when I've got up too early in the morning and my soul isn't my own, so to speak.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*November 30.*

The tiresome thing is that if you sit near the fire here you can't see to write; and if you sit away from it, you are frozen. Not that there is any news. I'm very much afraid that I shan't get any verses done. If I had the proper concentration, I might, but there are seven people strewed about the room at most times, one lamp (without a shade) and N.C.O.'s popping in at intervals.

The men are all very grousy about their rest, and certainly I have not run about more since joining the Army—all the morning from 8.30 and a football match or run in the afternoon. I joined the riding school party this afternoon and galloped about quite happily bare-backed. Half of them can't ride at all.

I think for a youth this would all be great fun—though you mustn't think I'm having at all a bad time.

*December 1.*

I have just got my first letters from you. I can't answer them properly to-night. Everything is going on all right. These people are very pleasant and I dare say I shall even find some real friends.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*December 3.*

The deerskin waistcoat from L.<sup>1</sup> has arrived and is fearfully nice. I put it on and then ran two miles, without stopping, with my platoon with that and the other one on—so got very hot. I have written to L.

I have just re-read your letters in my valise after a hot bath following the run. That sounds luxurious, doesn't it?

Don't bother to send papers. We get them regularly in the mess only a day late, and none too much time to read them.

I hear another Bn. has also come out of the trenches for a rest, so Frdk. is out of it too. We are pretty sure to be here for another fortnight at least.

I am just beginning to know my platoon. Have two very good sergeants. One of them beat me by a little in the two mile run to-day, but I had too many clothes on, and two miles is too short anyhow.

Yesterday we took the Coy. for a route march to a town seven miles off, where they could buy cigarettes and things—it's a great grievance that they can't get anything here. A lovely day. On the way back one of the other subalterns and I stopped at another village where we had to attend a lecture on gas attacks, so lunched there before the lecture—excellent lunch of five courses (at

<sup>1</sup> Miss Lily Player, a cousin.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

2.30 p.m., after hours) served in about five minutes of our arrival. The French are good at that sort of thing. Then the lecture, which I retailed to my platoon this morning.

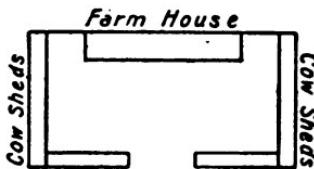
Very muggy and rainy to-day.

1. Gave gas lecture.
2. Listened to musketry lecture.
3. Lecture on treatment of frost-bite.
4. Two miles run with platoon.

All very practical, I think, but rather too much of it.

What shall I give to my platoon at Christmas? I think they have rather a thin time of extras and accommodation; though well-fed otherwise. Officers ought to fare like the men, I do believe, in spite of the arguments against it. Here they hardly can wash, for instance; or do anything in comfort.

This is our billet—



We are in the farm-house—men all round in barns and cow-houses—the centre a lively, noisy manury farm-yard with a pond in it and every variety of turkey, goose, duck, hen, pig, cow,

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

horse, and dog gobbling round. It is quite pictur-esque. The farmer very fat. I find myself quite fluent with my French, except occasionally.

*December 5.*

I don't seem able to get at the poems. To-day being Sunday, I thought I would, but have been hoicked out for revolver practice, making lists of drafts of men, and watching a football match, which C Coy., which is the best in the Bn., won easily. I haven't yet had much to do with my platoon, owing to these other parades, but shall try to chat with the men, whom I'm only beginning to know by name.

I enclose Frdk's letter, from which you will see that he seems contented with his lot, which I'm glad of.

This is only a scrap late at night. Another route-march to-morrow, and, I believe, an inspection by French the next day.

*December 9.*

It has been disgustingly wet to-day and we spent it mostly in a barn much worse than ours, giving short lectures to the men on all sorts of

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

things. I didn't give any, being in charge, but put on platoon sergeants, who start with great zeal and suddenly stop at the end of two minutes, having exhausted all their eloquence. I think practice in smoke helmets is what the men hate most; the things make you feel choked and sick for some minutes from the chemicals inside, and they would probably all much prefer to be gassed some weeks hence to wearing them now.

I sleep most comfortably in my valise. Would it interest you to know that it's rather the thing when one comes in at the end of the day to change into gum boots, which, with woolly soles inside, are most comfortable as evening dress? I'm in them now.

Yesterday at a football match a little man—a Rifleman—whom I didn't know from Adam, came up and told me he had been in the digging party at Warden with me, and has been out three months: we discussed old acquaintances, and he was most friendly, though I don't know his name now. I'm very bad at names.

It is far more interesting here than at Epsom or Minster. With these people and methods the work gets done, and it is, for the time being, quite reasonably hard work and not too stupid.

Now I must close, hoping this finds you in the pink, as it leaves me. Have I told you that expression, which occurs in two out of three letters from the men?

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*December 12.*

Your letters nearly always come in exactly at tea-time, which is right, as one can set and read them at once.

The last two days have been slopping. We fell in at 8.45 for a route march and inspection by General Plumer, and before we started were dripped by a regular thunderstorm. Then we meandered about for three hours before finding the General by the side of the road, where we splashed past him, my job consisting in giving 'Eyes left' at the critical moment, which I did without being prostrated with fright. But these smart inspections seem out of place in the middle of war. I think the whole Brigade marched past, if not the whole Division. In the afternoon watched a football match in several hailstorms. The R.B.'s ended by winning the Divisional final, having beaten Londons, Buffs, and Royal Fusiliers easily. We are going to have a cross country run on Tuesday, and I'm afraid my platoon will not win, as it has rather a tail in the running line.

To-day being the Sabbath Day, I'm doing nothing, and don't propose to. Fine and cold.

I continue to like my sergeants, but find it rather a bore and very absurd to have to lecture on subjects of which I know nothing and have no practical experience.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*December 13.*

To-day we had a company inter-divisional match which again C Coy. won, and a shooting match for snipers, which the R.B.s won, so the regiment does very well. This afternoon I made my whole platoon run a race round the two mile course, and came in second myself (14 minutes; the first man, Cpl. P., taking 13½)—not so bad for the oldest gentleman present, as it is very hilly. The whole platoon got in under 19 minutes, which beats the time done by other platoons, at present. How we become sporting! I shall soon be an authority on sokker snips.

Yesterday afternoon I got M. and I. on to the range and let off a rifle (for the first time) and didn't do so badly, happening to hit the target before either of them. Rifles are less alarming than I imagined, and at any rate I now know how to load them and what a safety catch does—useful knowledge in war-time.

To-morrow I lead forty shivering reinforcements to be gassed at some village near—it's rather a sensible idea for accustoming recruits to the thing, but I trust it will not make us all sick. The helmets themselves smell like one o'clock. This is just a short note—more perhaps after being gassed to-morrow.



## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*December 14.*

I was successfully gassed with my forty men. The gas helmets are a little smelly, but you don't notice the gas to speak of, though it was whizzing out of the cylinder as we passed down the trench. True, we were only about two minutes in it, and I doubt if it was all proper gas, though it smelt beastly later on when I got into some far-borne fumes after the show was over. The worst of it was that it fixed itself on my clothes and now I smell like an operating room full of ether.

This afternoon I went for a walk with T.<sup>1</sup> He is a very good sort. He is said to be very cool and gallant in the trenches.

Our weather is distinctly better, frosty at night and quite bright by day. I sleep directly at the foot of a window with the panes nearly all broken, and in direct line with the door, so <sup>T</sup> ought to be getting very much hardened.

*December 17.*

By latest arrangements we are to be here for Christmas and three or four days after, so I don't suppose the trenches will be reached till 1916 at earliest.

It's rather quaint in this army how one is

<sup>1</sup> Captain Geoffrey B. Tatham, The Rifle Brigade.

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surrounded by inglorious heroes. One of the most troublesome men has a Russian medal for gallantry, and I heard yesterday that another who bags one's cigarettes and things ought to have had the V.C.

*December 19.*

Two letters from you since my last and sweets from Richoux—the best chocolates I've tasted from anywhere for ages.

I've just been appointed Mess President; I'm going to try and amend it by slow degrees.

I might have become Coy. Bombing Officer, if I had been keen. M. had been appointed and didn't want the job; and I offered to take it but without much keenness, as it means going off on a course and having to learn the whole job in a week, which I detest; also leaving my platoon just when I'm beginning to know it. Otherwise I wouldn't have minded—I don't think there's any real choice of risks, and the fact is I don't think I am very brilliantly quick at learning any of these quasi-engineering feats.

I still greatly think the war will go well, and everybody out here is very cheerful.

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*December 21.*

Not very much time before post goes, and the reason is that I have become O.C. of C Coy. as well as Mess President for at least eight days, as T. has gone on leave and I am the senior subaltern. Consequently you might have seen me on a horse this morning leading the Coy. on a Batt. route march, and I have work and interruptions by the hundred—most of it, of course, absolutely novel. I haven't the foggiest idea as to whether I have the unfortunate Riflemen (who appear before me on charges) shot or admonished, and in vain, while in England, I tried to get some one to tell me. However, I ought to learn something in the course of it and cannot do much harm, I imagine, in a rest camp; and if I get strafed, it really doesn't matter. Not my fault if I know nothing about it. Don't worry if I'm short in letters, I really shall be rather busy.

*December 23.*

Just another line and a half in great haste. I really am rather rushed, for in addition to the ordinary things an O.C. has to do, I have the Christmas dinner to arrange for, and the point is that we must have 200 plates, tables, and dishes for 200, and, if possible, a piano. All these things

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ought to have been arranged for weeks ago to make sure of them, and were supposed to be, and now not two days at most to go, they are none of them forthcoming; and I send out parties in all directions to beg, borrow, or steal them in a place the size of Puckeridge or smaller.

Also I had to send off I. to inspect the trenches we go into in the New Year—for two days—and a servant who almost declined to go, as it's not much fun being in the mire and shot at for two days just before Christmas merely as a fatigue. Otherwise we are going all right—no thanks to me, as the thing runs very smoothly, and provided I assume an air which is unjustified, they seem to imagine that somebody really is in command.

Spent half an hour last night in vain trying to persuade the farmer and farmeress to lend us their crockery for the men—but not they. If I were fluent enough to be daring in French it might possibly have been done; but they are not very generous, I fancy.

Just as I had finished your Richoux sweets some more of them came from O. H.<sup>1</sup>—much to the pleasure of the mess, which likes them.

I suppose I shall revert to Subaltern and the ordinary course next week—meanwhile you won't mind short letters, will you?

Christmas Day is going to consist of a vast

<sup>1</sup> Oscar Hilton, M.D., of Northwood, an old school and Oxford friend.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

dinner for the men—ducks and pork and plum puddings, and oranges and beer, followed by a concert, all in a barn.

The R.B.s have won every competition in the Division and so are highly pleased with themselves.

*December 24.*

This is the third day I have had no letter from you, but I know it's not just that you haven't written, because nobody else has had any letters either.

C. has at last got into the nearest town this afternoon, where he is going to buy Chinese lanterns, candles, and those sort of etcs. I sent the Coy. out this morning by platoons to pick holly, and they seem to have depleted the countryside pretty well. Tables are still a difficulty, and I have commissioned a sergeant and a French-speaking corporal to call on the Curé and see if he can raise any by his authority.

There was to have been a field day to-day in which I should have had to lead the Coy. in some intricate attack, but luckily it poured and the thing was put off. Not but what I believe it's quite easy to give orders on these occasions, provided the men are skilled in carrying them out.

Yesterday I rode over to a lecture at — on the trenches we are to occupy. The lecturer was

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some Colonel—I believe his name was H. If so, he was a youth Frdk. and I were at school with, but I didn't recognise him and the room was too crowded to get close. Heavy rain going back and the animals galloped most of the way.

There are various changes being made in the Batt. T. will be in command of C Coy. instead of second in command, etc., etc. This all sounds very military, doesn't it? and other people are mostly desperately keen on their positions. I fear I am too old to have any military ambition; at the same time, it is decidedly more interesting to command than to be commanded—so perhaps I had better aim at being a Brigadier, say.

*Boxing Day, 1915.*

After three days of no letters I got five from you on Christmas Day—about 6 p.m.—and one from my mother, and one from yours.

I hope you saw V.<sup>1</sup>—he seems to have been in luck about Christmas. I've forgotten his Batt. and address, so can't write (I suppose I could, but I haven't). I hope nobody will try to make me learn signalling.

I feel we don't need a confession of sins at present so much as of our stupidities. Perhaps that comes from seeing all these patient and gallant youths

<sup>1</sup> Lieut. J. H. Vaughan, M.C., Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers. See introduction.

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about, so cheery in what they all know is for them a daily risk of their lives.

By the way, the chocolates from L. have arrived. Richoux pack beautifully, and they are the best possible chocolates.

Now, about Christmas here, which was fairly amusing and will be more so to look back upon, I expect.

We sent C. into the town, and he brought out on a mess-cart chocolates and crackers and plates and cigarettes, which made a very fine show. The C.Q.M.S. is quite a brilliant decorator, and turned out the barn in great style with masses of greenery, and the lamps hung in festoons with Chinese lanterns between.

There were Services in the morning and a football match at 12—won by 11 platoon of C Coy.—and dinner began at 2. The C.O. came round and made a speech, and we gave him port, and all drank to the health of the Coy., and then they set to on pork and geese and plum puddings, and kept it up with a concert till a late hour. Our own dinner didn't arrive till 4 p.m., after much strafing of the servants. At 7 the C Coy. officers had to go round to the Sergeant's Mess, and I had to make a speech and drink half a tumbler of whisky, followed by champagne. They were all cheery. Then we supped off a magnificent pie sent out by T. from the Trinity cook, and at 11 p.m. the farmeress came and besought me to turn

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the servant's party out of the kitchen where they were making a frightful row. I routed them out and they sang songs under our windows, and finally retired. Heaven knows how many men turned up at the correct hour at their billets, but I believe drunks and absents are overlooked on Christmas Day. All sorts of officers trotted in at intervals, and on Christmas Eve we all went round to each other's houses and wished each other well.

I don't fancy a certain amount of drinking can be helped, and they don't do much in the ordinary way. I retired to bed at 11.30 and didn't get up till 9 this morning, so had a pretty good sleep.

We haven't heard definitely when we move. I will write as soon as I can again.

*December 28.*

This will be a sleepy letter, as the Field Day came off to-day, and I spent from 8.30-4.30 leading C Coy. to the attack, and sending orderlies and signallers, and sergeants and subalterns flying in all directions except (probably) the right one. I don't think we did any worse than the other Coys., however; and these sort of attacks always seem a gorgeous mix-up; and on the whole I thought it as easy to be an O.C. as a Rifleman. Now T. has returned from leave and I revert to

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2nd in command, without, I think, having given myself away too much, and having had some useful practice.

Got a letter from you on my return, and had a hot bath and shall go to bed in a few minutes. Yesterday we had an alarm that we were to be inspected by Haig (C.-in-C.) but it didn't come off.

There is still nothing fixed about our move, and even our destination is altered by rumour daily. Sleepy I am.

*December 29.*

Just a line afore I go to bed—to tell you that we don't seem to be moving for some days. Inspection by G.O.C. to-morrow.

*December 31.*

I don't think there is much news—still none of our departure or of our destination.

I have just been strafing my servant, who is also the chef, over his cookery, with result that we are getting superb meals as a mess, and he is looking after me individually much better too. He said nobody had criticised his cookery before, and he had cooked for seven years for the Guard's mess. I said I had no doubt that he was a *cordon bleu*, but some evidence of it must be forthcoming.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

Still the Village. *January 3, 1916.*

I came back from a long route march through much mud, followed by a long lecture on some new trenches, to find a letter.

Of course we are bound to be in the trenches pretty soon now, but that's what we came for; and I believe the R.B.s are expected to hold the least choice ones as a rule. Even so, the risks are not much more or less, I suppose.

Did I tell you we were dealt out steel helmets a week ago to wear in the trenches—frightfully heavy but supposed to be good against shrapnel.

*January 5.*

This is a beautiful morning and I hope is going to be fine for our move. The prospect of going into the trenches is still rather unreal and dream-like, but I suppose one will know about it at no very distant date. I wish I had finished some more poems. Perhaps when one gets into rest billets behind the lines there will be rather more time. I don't know. There are many things to learn and one has to be as wide awake as possible, and writing poems makes one rather absent-minded. Rather a sad accident has happened in my platoon—one of the best riflemen in it, an old soldier (as soldiers go now) went for an escapade

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at night with another man, and in the dark they both fell over a chalk pit and my man was killed, while the other broke his shoulder. I used to have him out to show the recruits how to handle a rifle, and I should think he was worth any two at rapid fire.

There's not much news. We've been routing about quite energetically and I think the men must be pretty fit. I am.

*January 6, 1916. Another place in France.*

I got two letters before moving. I was rejoiced to hear that you were in the pink as this leaves me at present, seated on my valise on the muddy floor of a small hut at which we arrived at 6 a.m. this morning, having started at 7 p.m. the night before. It's not the trenches yet, but may be when you get this.

The start from the rest billet was rather picturesque. A dark starry night, the Batt. in fours on the muddy road, singing and shouting good-byes to the villagers, captains on horses, and pack animals jogging behind down the endless French avenues. We entrained about seven miles away —sat rather thick in a beestje carriage, where I fell asleep about six times and was joggled awake by the sudden way they brake the French trains when they are going at top speed. The men on

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trucks on the floor, which I fancy was quite as comfortable as the seats we were on. Then dismounted at a place that has been shelled and still is at intervals, tramped through heaps of filthy streets, very dark and muddy, but the sky between all quivering with light from the Very lights on the not very distant Front. Not much noise of guns, which seems to go on mostly by day. The effect was (when we got into the open country) of the fireworks at Henley seen across a flat land like the Sheppey marshes. Constant passing of horses and waggons and troops on the road; but only an hour before we got to this place of liquid mud, where we slept on the floor (after some cocoa) until about 11 a.m., when we had breakfast. I was very glad of my fur lining as our valises did not arrive until after breakfast, and we slept as we were. I slept very soundly myself and wasn't really cold, or if I was I didn't know it.

Apparently we shall continue to mess in the trenches, which are said to be fairly dry. Those we were to have gone into were waist-deep in parts and so isolated that in the fire trench we should have had to get meals when we could by ourselves. So that is an improvement.

It's quite an animated scene outside—mule carts and horse carts and men on horses and mules all splashing about in the mud under a very sodden sky, which looks as if it were going to rain buckets shortly.

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I was going into the nearest town for the afternoon with T., but the order allowing officers off has been cancelled, so I'm staying here instead, a-scribbling to you.

It's absurd the amount of things one carries on the march. I had a pack and two haversacks, glasses, revolver, smoke helmet, and goggles (you're supposed to carry two) and map case all strung about me; and a steel helmet ought also to have been slung to the pack, but ours went by mess-cart. I walked in my long boots and changed into my rubber boots.

Getting dark and tea beginning to arrive.

DANS LES TRANCHÉES. *January 9, 1916. (Sunday.)*

I got two letters from you last night, so that the trenches are not so bad as they might be. I marched the Coy. up to the trenches with I., as T. went up earlier in the day to prospect. Very interesting—along a dull, ugly road that is already historic, I suppose, through towns that have become famous through being reduced to dust. In one of these all of us were dealt out gum-boots, thigh-high and wet through, which is what happens in the Army when the object is that you shall have dry feet, but I fancy there is the excuse that there aren't enough of them, and one Batt. has to get straight into those left behind by the Batt. that

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has gone out. By this time it was dark and safe to march through the shelled area, which we did, wading through pools of mud and water, and holes eminently calculated to sprain your ankle. The Coy. ahead had one man shot through the leg by a stray bullet, but we had (and have) no casualties so far. Since arriving about 7 o'clock p.m. on the 7th I have had about six hours' sleep in 48 hours—not enough. Some of the men have had less, I fancy, and that in mud holes: unavoidable.

The difference from what one expected in the trenches is that these are so filthy and dilapidated-looking; not regular trenches and nicely arranged barbed wire as in Sheppey, but crumbled up barricades in the middle of what looks like an earthquake combined with a snowslide, with ancient rusty scraps of wire hanging in festoons here and there, but pretty effective nevertheless. Everything gets blown up at intervals and inextricably mixed, clothes and tins and dug-outs and every mortal thing you can imagine. Otherwise they are roomier than anything at Sheppey. Since arriving I've seen almost all the things one reads of—aeroplanes being shelled in every direction, rifle fire, and crater mines being blown up and all the rest of it, except an attack or heavy shelling of our lines, I'm glad to say.

The first night and day were fairly peaceful—though our R.E. (a Canadian) wrecked the German mines late in the evening, and the earth shook, and

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we all stood to in case a crater was formed and had to be occupied. But it wasn't.

To-day, being Sunday, opened rather more characteristically, I suppose. Having retired to bed at 2 a.m. in a sort of little dug-out, 2 ft. 6 high —room for one with one's legs sticking out a trifle—I was hauled out at 5 a.m. because the wind had changed and a gas attack was possible. We stood about in gusts of rain till 7 a.m. when I again retired to bed and was wakened by the Boches sending over rifle grenades, nasty buzzing things that make a noise like an enormous hornet, and I found I. just outside, ducking because he expected one on his head. They sent over twenty (you can see them coming and dodge if you have room) but did no damage, and I had breakfast and went on duty from 10 a.m.—2 p.m. During this you trot round and chat with the sentries and take an occasional glimpse in a safe direction and listen to the patter of bullets and find out if anybody has heard or noticed anything, and so on.

Meanwhile our artillery started shelling the Boche; their F.O.O. coming into our front line to get the range, and they began to shell back. This went on for some time, at the end of which I went to see if the platoon was rubbing in anti-frost bite, whereupon a biggish shell fell about 15 yds. away and I had to retire into a very safe place we have, with one shoe off and one shoe on, so to speak.

Then back to lunch, and now I'm off, and writing

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to you, but still exceedingly sleepy; while guns go on overhead, but not much at hand.

The men seem wonderfully cheerful and good-natured about everything; but, of course, childishly foolish in some ways. They will fish water out of some filthy puddle, throw away their socks and do anything the fancy takes them that is reckless.

The mud is difficult to exaggerate. I am crusted with it already, and have a large rent in the seat of my breeks, and haven't washed. Otherwise, I don't think they're as bad as I expected, though there are faint sickly smells and things that take some getting used to. It is extremely interesting in many ways, and I suppose when one becomes experienced one may be some use. I believe T. is extremely good—very cool and conscientious and forethoughtful, and I doubt if we could have a better captain.

It's quaint dodging by oneself at night round dangerous corners and chatting with sentries you don't know and can't see about nothing in particular. Last night three cats were playing about in front of our parapet in the moonlight.

By the time you get this we shall probably be out again in reserve and luxury; so picture it all over for the time being when you get it. I haven't been unpleasantly cold yet and am in the pink.

Our cook-house, which is also the servants' dug-out, is opposite our 9 x 3 mess-room dug-out; and there you see either five servants snoring or

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the chef sitting over a brazier taking things out of his pockets and dropping them into the saucepan for our consumption. He sent up some tea which smelt so violently of dead cats that we couldn't touch it in spite of being very thirsty. Water (pure) is a difficulty.

Don't worry if letters are delayed. They are erratic, and I may at times be too desperately sleepy to hold a pencil. Explain this to my mother. I'll try and write more when we get into reserve.

I think I'll try and get a mug of water to wash in and shave now.

*January 10, 1916.*

Just a line to say that I'm safe and well. Also I had six hours' sleep last night, which is a great improvement, and I shall even do some more this afternoon. Nothing happened later yesterday, and to-day has been pretty quiet, and I've been watching German working parties in the distance, and an unknown piece of railway. There must have been something on early to-day, for about 7 a.m. a terrific row on our flank waked me and I believe went on for an hour, but I was far too sleepy to take any interest in it. It's a beautiful day. More sleep—so I must come to an end. My chief hours are 9.30 p.m.—1.30 a.m. and 9.30 a.m.—1.30 p.m. The night part is rather long and dull, though one has some interesting talks.

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*January 11 or 12 (?)*

Just a line to say that we go out to-night into reserve, which is a perfectly safe place. A certain amount of strafing on both sides going on. I would write more but am overcome with sleep again, having had little last night owing to giving my bed to an officer who came in yesterday. It was too jolly cold to sleep elsewhere. Having a fairly interesting time. Too sleepy for words.

*January 12.*

Here we are in the ruins of a very historic town—in some shell-proof cellars, where I even had a sort of bed last night—and the time to lie on it. In fact I had 9-10 hours' sleep, and having had practically none the night before (when I was also frozen stiff) I feel distinctly the better for it, and ready to write quite a long letter. I hope I didn't give too bad an impression in my first letter. It's no use pretending they are pleasant, as many people probably console themselves with thinking. It isn't the filth or the wet or want of sleep or general discomfort or chance of getting a bullet if you walk unwarily, that is unpleasant; it is the shells and shells only, and when they say it is a gunner's war, they mean the gunners have all the fun and the infantry all the horrors. There

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they are, somewhere miles behind, and they open fire—when it suits them, more or less—on the infantry trenches where, it may be for hours at a time, you squat, not knowing if the next one is coming on top of you or not. There are various noises, of course, which I expect you have seen described: Those I like least so far are—1, a sound as of the loudest thunderclap you have ever heard going off in your ears; 2, a noise as of the whole of Harrod's Stores falling in with a sudden crash. I don't think it's just my finnickiness or the novelty of it that makes them alarming: in fact, some people say that the more you've had of them the less you like them. I was standing yesterday morning next a Buff officer who has been buried by a shell and been out since the beginning, and I don't think he liked the shelling that was going on any more than I did. But no doubt some men are better suited for the sort of strain it must be than others. We are said to have had a very light time—only three casualties in the Coy.—and we are out now for some time.

I rather think that one can acquire some sort of philosophy about shells in course of time—the fact is that it's no good expecting them to hit you. They probably won't, and if they do one knows nothing of it.

The advantage of being an officer is that you haven't very much time to think about yourself whether you want to or not.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

Without artillery the trenches would seem quite peaceful and pleasant, and it is pleasant to see the old hands going on cooking their dinners stolidly with the shells crashing round, though they can't like them. The recruits seem to have taken their first experiences very well. But then the older N.C.O.s can be very useful in consoling them, and this, I should say, makes for the greater value of the Regular Battalions as compared with the others.

T. is exceedingly good in the trenches. He barely slept at all and didn't particularly seem to need it—that's the thing I shall find it particularly difficult to live up to. I never did like the earliest dawn !

*January 12. (To his Mother.)*

Am at present, and for some time to come, behind the firing line in shell-proof cellars, which one subaltern says he would like to live in for the rest of his life—after seeing the trenches.

Truly, nobody need think the trenches (at any rate the worse ones) anything but disgusting; but there is a great deal of fascination in them, and the men are extraordinarily interesting and good-humoured, and cook under fire; and they get on the whole a worse time than the officers in the ordinary way of accommodation. Our

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new ones have the advantage of old hands present to back them up, and the disadvantage of having more dangerous trenches to occupy.

It's all very odd and rather exciting—when on duty at night one goes about alone for hours up and down deserted trenches with sounds of firing in all directions and the Boches within listening distance, and flares going up at intervals through mud nearly knee-deep, slipping and sliding in every direction in the dark and not quite certain at first whether one is trotting straight into the German trenches or not. The landscape is exceedingly desolate—ruins and shell holes wherever you look—and the only cheerful thing is the sun when it appears, and the men, whose cheeriness is unending.

Still the Cellars. *January 13.*

I am sitting in the mess room cellar, which is about  $6 \times 10$  ft. and holds the officers of two Cosys. The space is sardiny and the cold icy. The difficulty about writing is that there are so many details and so little time to describe them. Last night, for instance, I sat here with the others and we had the Brigade machine gun officer in discussing the position of the guns, and the C.O. and the Adjutant discussing the trenches, and all the officers of A Coy (B. included) chatting and

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laughing, and I got to bed at 11.30, and had a good sleep till 9.

To-day I inspected my platoon and then wandered about a ruined place and picked some daphne mezereum and rosemary. To-night at 10 p.m. I take a working party up to the trenches and return about 1 or 2 a.m.

— told me as we left the trenches that he would give anything to be back in Sheppey, and he was one of the youths who was wild to get out. They certainly don't leave many illusions of the Romance of War—the more credit to the people who have stuck it a year or more.

14. Got back safe and sound at about 12 midnight. There was a high and furious wind blowing most of the time—very cold—also the chance of being machine-gunned, so the men worked like buffaloes and we got through in no time.

To-day has been slack and luxurious, sitting over a charcoal brazier in the cellars, eating and dozing. Now we are bound for our rest camp.

Still the Rest Camp. *January 17, 1916.*

I seem to get your letters very regularly, if I don't get one one day, I get two the next.

The camp is rather dull and cool, but one gets plenty of sleep, which is a good thing.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

Yesterday I did practically nothing but censor letters and inspect the platoon and have a small greasy warm bath. To-day there may be a digging party, but I doubt it.

*January 20.*

I wrote a small scrap yesterday and must try to make up this time.

*2 hours later.* Have been rather hustled after all, inspecting platoon, censoring letters (some of them write a dreadful lot and in any case thirty letters take some time to read through), also writing crime sheets.

Our shed in which we live is, is as T. said the other day, the sort of place where you might possibly put your garden roller in peace time, and now, by an irony of fate, we have been given a small stove for it, but no fuel, and when we go out and hunt small damp chips of wood, they smoke us out.

I know my letters aren't very consecutive, but that's mostly an attempt to be too conscientious. If I told you we walked two hours from the trenches to here I suppose it would be giving some sort of information, though very little.

Since writing I have taken one working party up to the trenches again from 3 p.m.—12 midnight. We went miles and miles in artillery waggons—

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perfectly open springless carts (holding twelve men)—which, when the horses gallop, reminded me of being on the elephant in pursuit of the leopard. Your spine just gets bumped to bits. The work is rendered less dull than it might be by the fact that the Boches turn machine guns on you at intervals, when you have to lie in the mud. I'm glad to say we had no casualties, though the Regt. next had eight the same night.

Coming back I produced a tin of Edinburgh rock; after passing it round my cart we tried to pass it to the one in the rear. It was rather like holding a carrot in front of a donkey's nose. The outrider of the four horses couldn't quite get up, and galloped and galloped his team till he eventually did. Nasty misty moisty night it was.

*January 22, 1916.*

I'm so sorry about Frdk., and I fear he will feel it being knocked out so soon. I hope it won't prove dangerous and that he'll get well slowly.

The Rifle Brigade seems to have been rather strafed lately. We have had four officer casualties—none in C Coy. A Coy. had a bad time on a digging party the night before last. Hullo, must leave for post.

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REST CAMP. *January 22.*

Partly owing to playing Bridge the last few nights, which I can't very well refuse, there being just four of us at present, and partly because the post has taken to going off earlier in the morning, I've rather scrubbed my letters to you, and they have been short if frequent. Now I may as well begin a longer one, though there's not much news. I. and I started on a peaceful country walk this afternoon and had to turn back because the beastly Boches started shelling the road just ahead of us, which was rather unusual cheek at this distance from the firing line. The day before we walked in to —, a town which is fairly complete for these parts, to do some shopping.

The country is exceedingly flat, prim, dull, and miry—camps everywhere, and the roads, which would ordinarily, I suppose, be as deserted as the Ware to Puckeridge road is, almost as crowded as Oxford Street with artillery waggons and limbers, mule-carts, motor-lorries and omnibuses, despatch riders and troops all bustling along through the never-ending mud. You get splashed from head to foot *en route*, if you walk, but we managed to get lifts both ways (six miles) from motor vans which joggle you along in the dark at a great pace. The town itself is mostly turned into small shops selling tinned fruit to Tommies, and other rubbish; but we had chocolate at quite a decent confectioner's,

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which has been there evidently from the start, and got back for dinner.

*Sunday Morning.* I'm camp orderly officer to-day and have just been the rounds of our camp. There was a frost in the night, and to-day the sun is shining brightly through a slight mist; and I am sitting by the stove in our hut (we've got some fuel for once).

*January 25.*

We're still here till the end of the week anyway, and I'm afraid we're going to do things like Coy. and Batt. drill to improve our discipline, when lots of real work yells to be done. The men haven't all had a bath yet since before going into the trenches—and I'm pretty scratchy myself after two hot baths.

Yesterday I went to a village hard by, and sat in a tub under a hot water douche for about three-quarters of an hour. It was very pleasant. We then had tea—buttered buns at a hut rejoicing in the name of the Officers' Club—not bad—if the buns had been hot, but they weren't!

I hope Frdk. is going well. I haven't heard from him yet, and imagine it is a good deal worse than he makes out. Personally, I would rather he didn't come out again, being too good.

It frosts by night and gets nice and bright about 10 o'clock. Much nicer than damp mug.

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*Thursday, January 27.*

There is not much news. We are doing stupid things like Battalion Drill and so forth. Yesterday I marched the men eight miles to a bath and back—their first since they started from the Rest Village. They also got their first clean shirt. To-day we had a feint alarm at 4.30 a.m., and tumbled out in the dank and dark for one and a half hours in fighting order. Now 6 p.m., have just had my hair cut and here I am writing.

We expect to go into the trenches the beginning of next week, but don't count on it. No digging parties this week. How is Frdk.? I haven't heard from him.

*January 29.*

I like the handkerchiefs you send. Washing is very fitful. Sometimes my servant does it, and sometimes a neighbouring farmeress. The results are very shady—but it's useful for handkerchiefs and such. My towels get blacker and blacker under his laundering.

I saw a letter in the *Times* the other day advocating that the sandbags should be coloured instead of white. It would be very difficult to find one that wasn't the colour of the Flanders mud once it has been disembarked. Of course in summer it would take longer.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

You wanted to know about the rest camp, which I thought I had described. Well, it consists of a large field or series of fields (there being no hedges) churned into mud—no grass—board walks 18 in. wide through it and huts and tents in rows. We have a hut, and the men huts or tents, according to their luck.

A broad ditch runs at the bottom of the field and out of that our washing water (and a good deal of the water for our tea, I fancy, and the men's tea) is fetched. Rats run in every direction at night, and some people chase them through the slime with electric torches and sticks. The huts are as at Shurland, only smaller, and mostly with mansard roofs, so that you can only stand upright in the middle. *Voilà!* I am sitting by myself in ours at present and have been most of the afternoon, T. having gone up to see the new trenches and the others having an afternoon off.

*Sunday.* T. came back last night and said the trenches are not so bad as they might be. We shall be there off and on for a fortnight, so you will get rather shorter letters.

I had a hot bath yesterday in I.'s bath, and just as I was getting in, a gas alert or alarm sounded and all the gas helmets had to be inspected, and as I was the only officer at home, so to speak, I had to bustle through the bath and do them.

The water inspection is like our experience at the paper mill when the military visited us. Strict

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orders that the men drink only the water supplied. Practice, to drink out of any shell hole they see. The water supplied isn't enough or often enough. Of course it is nearly always turned into tea, which, with inoculation, I suppose, prevents the consequences that might be expected.

I read an amusing account in the paper of Friday of a visit by seven influential recruiters to the firing line. The spokesman described how they came under shell fire and fled to dug-outs, where they waited hours. But they found the dug-outs dry and airy and nearly all carpeted. T. suggests that they must have been taken to Boulogne or somewhere, and the shell fire was a bomb party practising bombs. I don't know whether that sort of nonsense is useful or not; after all there is something to be said for the truth on most occasions.

My servant is doing rather better, but he is an old humbug. Told me he was no longer young—getting on for 40 !

REST CAMP, *Sunday 30.*

C Coy. is stopping back after all for a day or two more.

REST CAMP, *February 1.*

I am so sorry about Frdk. It will be a great blow to him, I know, not because of the climbing

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or anything of that sort, but because he'll hate not to be able to rush about on other people's behalf, and will, of course, not be able to see himself in the heroically wounded light.

I don't think it's going to be any good my telling you I'm likely to be in the trenches soon or otherwise: at present I'm still here with the Coy. and may go up for a day for some time to come. So you'd better just think I'm in the best possible place. We're across the road from the old camp—in what was Hd. Quarters—a much finer hut, and I have a bed—sacking hung over boards—which I must say I like much less than the floor as it sags in the middle, which the floor doesn't. No doubt it's less draughty, and as it has started to freeze and be cold of nights, I dare say the bed is on the whole an improvement.

*January 27. (To his Mother.)*

Many thanks for the magnificent parcel of biscuits and rocks and socks and all the other things. The whole mess rose *en masse* at the Edinburgh rock and pigged it. It seems very much a thing to have now and then. But you mustn't send so much at a time. We simply can't eat it, and eat too much in the effort. So economise, my mother, and help your country and your son at the same time.

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The scarf from Raymond and Meriel<sup>1</sup> is really very useful; I mostly wear it round my waist in the evenings.

REST CAMP, *February 3.*

Just a line before we go up to the trenches. Only three days at a time. I will try and write each day but don't count on it. Not always easy to write and not always easy to send if you do.

TRENCHES, *February 4.*

I don't know if this will get off to-day. I came up with the rear last night, and the Blighters shelled the road as we went, one about 100 yds. behind, another in front and off to the left and right—'cannon in front of them,' in fact—but not bad. And all the old hands are ready with stories of how they came along with shrapnel bursting over their heads in the old days. The nuisance was not knowing whether the next is going to be in front or behind.

Several other regiments got off the road and stopped, but the R.B.s marched on—not, I may say, without my consulting my sergeant, as I fancy I should have stopped myself, and taken shelter,

<sup>1</sup> Raymond and Meriel Vernède, son and daughter of his brother Arthur, of the I.C.S., mentioned in the introduction.

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though it's the wrong thing to do unless the shelling is very heavy. The trouble is to know what is heavy and what isn't. However, we arrived quite safely, and I have the satisfaction of knowing that this is about the worst trench that even some of the sergeants have been in. More for its general unpleasantness than for anything else. You can easily step in over your thigh-boots in mud; I'm writing in a dug-out in which you can't sit upright and through which there is a trickle of water; the stench in parts is too appalling for words, and we have been having shells right over our heads, luckily doing no damage, for the last four hours, starting at breakfast. If you move by day you have to go double. Any one who finds it 'ripping' is very much to be envied, if he exists, but I doubt it. T. suggested the people you mentioned must be with one of the armies that have never been in the trenches. And you must remember that gunners probably don't see one shell to a thousand they fire.

However, we've had no casualties as yet, and I dare say shan't. To tell you of the advantage of this trench—one gets much more sleep, as one simply can't move about much; and my feet are warm with a pair of thick soles in the gum boots and three pairs of thick socks.

The view from here is rather quaint. On our right front is a wood with every tree struck by lightning, as it were, and the ground below blackened

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too. This afternoon has turned fine, after rain all night, and I have been watching the snipers sniping while our guns have begun to pound their trenches in retaliation, and you see volumes of smoke and a German trench fly into the air with a crash. I must say it strikes me as only less horrible than the English ones doing so; but it always bucks the men to see our guns getting to work, and they will stand any amount of pounding themselves for the sake of it.

TRENCHES, *February 5.*

All is well, except that I've rather gone off my feed in this filthy place. It's largely due to the smell and dirt of the food. Our dug-out really is a floor of mire which absorbs anything dropped in it, and is composed, I should say, largely of other people's rotting socks and bread crumbs! And one wanders about over the knee in quagmire, never knowing when you're going deeper. Fearful row, guns going all the time. We've had no casualties except two men shot by snipers, one killed—the first in C Coy. since I joined—which is extraordinarily good. And this man T. had warned to keep his head down only five minutes before. One calls it carelessness, but the fact is, after you've stooped till your back aches, it's almost beyond human nature not to straighten up occasionally.

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I went out with a wiring party in front of the trenches last night for about an hour and a half. T. went himself with the men—he's very nice in that way, so I could not but offer to go too. It sounds more exciting than it is. I mostly got mixed up with the wire in the dark, while one of the corporals did all the work; and we weren't fired on, except by stray bullets, and put up quite a fair amount. The old hands don't mind a bit, but the boys don't like it. We come out tomorrow.

Better close before the mud out of my hair or neck falls on this. Haven't washed, haven't shaved since coming in. Nor has nobody.

*Sunday, February 6?*

I am very well and fit but I suppose I have just found out what it can be like. We have been heavily shelled for about two hours, and one sat there with intervals of seconds, it seemed, not knowing where the next would come. The Boches have just left off for the day, I hope, as, though the casualties were not heavy, it was enough for everybody's nerves. Several men are suffering from shock—shivering and quaking and having to be carried off on stretchers. I'm sitting beside a bad case now—he can't even move. The marvel is that he came out alive—he was one of four in a

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dug-out, and was pulled out uninjured, the rest being killed. I don't want to meet any one who's had a ripping time out here.

By the way, this man has my scarf Raymond and Meriel gave me. I wish you'd send me another like it—thick wool, loosely knitted, about a foot wide and three yards long—the longer the better.

T. is splendid under this sort of thing. I wasn't as bad as I expected. I was in our dug-out to begin with with two Buff officers and got a stone pretty hard on my tin hat, after which I proposed we should move out, which we did, and the dug-out was knocked in a little later. Sat behind the parapet with the Buffs trying to find a safe place, but there wasn't any available. Found a man horribly injured in the face, with the C.S.M. who had just escaped. Tried to give him morphia, but couldn't manage it, so went for stretcher-bearers, who attended to him.

Boches have just begun shelling again—confound them—after half an hour's interval. Will send this off if we get out safely. We move in about three hours—none too soon.

*Monday.* Arrived here safe and sound in support trenches about 3.30 a.m. after the most unpleasant day—very nearly—that I've had. I still think it's right that war should be damnable, but I wish everybody could have an idea of how beastly it can be.

The Boches shelled us twice yesterday after I

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wrote, but only for a little, I'm glad to say, as everybody had had enough, I think, and several of the oldest hands said it was the worst shelling they had ever been through. Our casualties were remarkably small considering that wherever you crouched two or three shells seemed to split over your head every second. We had only five killed and about a dozen injured. T. sat most of the time with a wounded man across his knees, and the man said he knew it would be all right when the captain came along: which I thought was rather nice. One of our best sergeants was killed—a very nice man who was rather a friend of mine, though not in my platoon. I think the men are wonderful and awfully good to one another. The C.S.M. was knocked senseless by the same shell that injured the man I mentioned, and when he came to, dragged him into the dug-out, to which I traced them by a pool of blood. Even the chef, when I went for the stretcher-bearers, dashed out and leapt an open part of the trench where it had been crumpled in to go and help, which I'm afraid will render me weak-minded towards his cookery in future; the shells flying as hard as ever. It's an extraordinary sensation—every portion of the trenches seemed to have shells exploding over them and you were nearly deafened by the near ones. I really was in a great state of funk, but I'm not sure that it's avoidable. The least sensitive of the men, I fancy, are strung up to the last pitch,

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and I doubt if even T. was as cool as he looked, though looking it is all the battle under the circumstances.

C. was our only other officer there and he was very cool, and pulled the living man out of the smashed dug-out, which was a terrible sight. I would like all praisers of war to be under that sort of fire for a day, and if any remained, they would have less to say for it. The Buff youths were young and quite cheery, though they would ask me where to go, which I wasn't at all competent to tell them, and had to make them try several places without finding any that was really of use. At the end of it—about 5 o'clock—T., C. and I ate cake without tea and waited for the regiment that was due to relieve us. The latter arrived about two or three hours after time—a thing that can be singularly annoying under those circumstances, as the Boches began shelling again after we should have been well away, and I thought it was all going to recommence for another three hours. Luckily it didn't and I got off with my party about 11.30 p.m. for a five mile walk in thigh gum-boots and all our packs and things. I don't know when I have been more hot and exhausted. Rather over halfway luckily we came to the place where we hand in the gum-boots—an enormous dark building where they gave us hot soup (it tasted of tea and oxo mixed—in muddy cups!) grateful and comforting nevertheless. During the

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last half of the way we passed a man who'd gone lame from another platoon and I dropped behind to give him directions, but couldn't find him in the dark, so went on by myself. Rather eerie in the dark in unknown country with the sound of the guns in the distance.

I was very glad to get in at 3.30 a.m. and find hot tea and a bed. Have washed this morning—first time for four days!

Outside there is the most peaceful scene I have seen for weeks—green fields and unstruck trees, though the brutes put a few shells over here even, yesterday.

I couldn't get this off yesterday as there was no posting during the shells, but it will go this afternoon.

I feel rather doubtful as to whether I should tell you quite the unpleasantest side like this; but I think it's rather good that nowadays, when women have so much influence, they should not be fooled with the rosy side of things only. I don't think I've exaggerated and I don't think I'm using my imagination. At any rate I'm willing to bet that not one of the men but would have given a good deal to be out of it.

*Wednesday, February 8 or 9.*

Couldn't get you a letter yesterday as I slept most of the time after a fatigue party up to 2.30

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a.m. and then had to hustle to another at 4.30 p.m. Got back at 2.30 a.m. this morning. Really rather boring—dripping wet—covered with mud—shelled at intervals, and so on. Will write more soon.

*Wednesday, February 9.*

We aren't up again for some days, and I don't suppose we shall have another day like Sunday for some time to come. I hope not. It seemed impossible that we should get off so lightly. I suppose they put over twenty shells a minute on the average. I sent you a line to-day to catch the post, which, having slept from 2.30 to nearly 12, I hadn't time to make longer. It was a horrible wet night, and I led them slightly astray—not in the general direction, but taking a longer road than I need have done, which annoyed me rather, and ending up about a quarter of an hour from the spot without being sure where I was. However, I found a General there who lent me an orderly for the rest of the route, and seemed very amiable, and we got in about half an hour late. It didn't much matter, and came from depending on a sergeant who said he knew the road instead of making sure of it myself, which in the dark wasn't too easy. As it happened, I went a very safe way and we never met a shell, going or coming, though we got some where we were digging.

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You've no idea what it is like taking 100 men through an unknown bad trench at night. Sometimes you're on a board, then well over your knees in mire, then you trip over a wire or climb over a portion that has been knocked in by shells, or you come through a tunnel or out into an open quagmire. Everybody ought to sprain their ankles ten times over in the course of three hours of it, but nobody did last night. It's quite a strain in itself, apart from the shells, and the whole job took eight-and-a-half hours. I think the men are fearfully good about it—awfully slow, but they stagger along, grousing a certain amount, but generally cheerful. I believe as you become a veteran soldier you can tell almost exactly when and where a shell is going to burst, which is an advantage in that most of them aren't going to burst exactly where one is standing—not that you could do anything if it were. At present I haven't the foggiest idea where they're coming, and can't even distinguish between ours going off close at hand and theirs arriving, which gives me a sort of double share of the artillery effect! I fancy it's the same with most new folks. Of course during a strafe like Sunday's nobody can tell—there are too many flying too rapidly in all directions at once. I don't wonder the poor Injuns didn't like it. The best men get rattled after a certain amount of it.

It's very curious, I think, that without one's

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paying any attention to it in peace time, some of the brainiest people of all countries have been inventing these infernal weapons, which can and do—besides merely killing—inflict tortures at least as bad as anything the Chinese invented.

I've got a night off to-night, which, after two successive nights, is a considerable boon and blessing, and enables me to write properly.

There are so many ways of getting done in while taking the utmost precautions that I don't wonder the men get absolutely reckless, and care no more about rifle bullets than they do about fleas. Think of the way they go off into the dark along a road which they know is swept by shrapnel and walk on through it without apparently turning a hair.

*Friday, February 11.*

I am very fitly, thank you. It was the awful smell that made me feel sick the first few days in the trenches, but I was already much better before they started to strafe us, having kept away from food for a bit.

To-day I've been sitting in the dug-out, doing nothing but doze over a very funny coke brazier, which, however, has kept me warm. We don't go up in the front line again for a day or two and then only for a very short time. We ought to be out in so-called rest almost by the time you get this.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

I led a fairly easy carrying party fatigue last night—got one shell to our right which blew across the road, but nobody was hurt. A bit of mud touched my coat in passing, which indicates the pleasures of these roads. Got back at 10 p.m. instead of 2 a.m., which was a nice change.

It's been a most slimy day—dismal Flemish rain—a steady stream of it, making puddles everywhere.

I didn't tell you of a letter I censored from one of our sergeants to the mother of one of the men who were killed. It really was one of the nicest I've seen. He said—' We found your son in the ruins of the dug-out, where death must have been instantaneous. His head drooped forward a little, and there was a very peaceful expression on his face as I took him by the hand for the last time.' Then he went on to explain how popular he had been with his platoon, and how he had fallen fighting for his country, and enclosed some snowdrops 'picked just behind the lines.'

[To F.G.S.]

In Support. *February 11, 1916.*

MY DEAR FRED,

I do hope it continues to go well with you and you will manage to get back soon and cheer England up. We had a distinctly hot time a few

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

days ago in the front line—two hours of what every one agreed was about the fiercest shelling they had known. Extraordinarily few casualties considering, but it is a cruel business. Even to see men suffering from shock, flopping about the trenches like grassed fish, is enough to sicken one, and some of the face wounds are terrible. They were splendid—most of them will leave any shelter they have got to go and help one of the wounded and they remain cheerful to the last. Nor is it the sort of heedless gaiety I used to suspect them of, but a gallant effort to make the best of things and not let their morale fall below an ideal. Stretcher-bearers dodging about among shells—some of our older N.C.O.s cheering up the grenadiers of a service Batt. who had got rattled—a latest draft youth who never took his eye off his loophole during the bombardment (so his corporal told me)—these things are rather good. But anyone who hereafter shows a tendency towards exalting war ought to be drowned straight away by his country.

Since then we have gone into support, doing fatigues along shelled roads at night—not a very cheerful occupation, though here again the men are wonderfully good-tempered and cheerful, and march on in the dark without apparently heeding the shells.

Am slightly choked by a coke brazier in a dug-out upon which the dismal Flemish rain drips

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

incessantly—which makes me aware that I'm not writing a particularly happy letter to an invalid, without being able to reform much.

*Saturday—or probably Sunday—and I think  
February 13.*

It's a fine day after a very muddy and sodden one. C. and I are still in support with a portion of the Coy. and don't move up till to-morrow; then only for a very short time. Had a whole day's rest yesterday and about ten hours' sleep—not bad. No news beyond that.

My servant has gone sick and I have a new one. I think he will be good.

*In Rest again and very fit.  
Wednesday, February 16.*

I haven't had a letter from you since Sunday and I haven't been able to write you one, and I have had a time, of which I'll tell you as much as seems lawful. I think I wrote on Sunday morning saying that I wasn't going up into the trenches that day, but was going to carry some rations. Little did I know. We set out in the dark to meet the transport—about forty of us—and the transport was late at the rendezvous by about an hour, and when it did arrive informed me that rations

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were not to be taken up till a message came through from the Adjutant. So I withdrew my men off the road into a trench one of the sergeants by luck found, and some shells proceeded to come over. Then I met the Doctor outside his dressing-station, and he told me that there had been heavy shelling most of the day and his colleague had been wounded at the door of the dressing-station—right back—and he was afraid there would be casualties. The walking cases began to come down the road as we waited—a weird sight—bandaged men staggering along in the moonlight.

Presently I received a message to say we were to go forward with the rations, and found the Regimental C.S.M. waiting to conduct us in a great fatigue. Our two companies up had been heavily shelled all day and we were to relieve them—message I ought to have got before I started, but which hadn't come through. So there we were without our packs, our coats or our gum-boots, going into deep slime for a couple of days or so. We went forward with the stuff; I shouldered a huge sack of coke myself which I could hardly lift, and the others were almost equally laden, if not quite. As we went down the road, bang went some shells just ahead of us and in the rear, and we all flopped down and I shoved the sack in front of me, not that it would have been of any use. We waited till they stopped and then went on to find a four-horse wagon just ahead with two

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

horses and the driver killed by one of the shells. Got to the trenches without casualties and found T. waiting to lead us up. My dinner and bed gone for the night. We got up by slow degrees and took over from one of the other Coys. who had lost very heavily. The Boche restarted almost as soon as we got to the Coy. H.Q. dug-out, and there I sat the rest of the evening, and in fact all night—a very strange scene. A place smaller than my study at home into which plopped crowds at intervals to take refuge from the shells. All sorts and conditions, from the C.O. who had come up to see how things were, to a Scotch doctor hastily sent for with loads of stretcher-bearers. Later, a sergeant from another regiment—suffering from nerves—dashed in, having abandoned his digging party, of which he felt sure none remained, though only one or two were hit. I gave him a kola nut and sent him off; and engineer officers turned up, and officers of other Batt., and the post, bringing quite the best timed parcel I've had, from my mother, containing a cake, gingerbread, dates, Edinburgh rock, and a pair of socks. The socks I put on over the others, and stuffed myself into some killed or wounded man's gum-boots which I found were full of holes. The rest of the things we and a lot of others lived on for the next twenty-four hours, during which we hadn't a drop of water—only whiskey. As a matter of fact, I had a cushy time, comparatively speaking,

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

as T. insisted on placing the riflemen himself and M. did the bombers. It appeared that the trenches were very nearly non-existent, the casualties large, and C Coy. had the pleasant prospect of sitting in what holes remained for some time. The sappers deepened some holes for them during the night, but before morning one of the sergeants I brought up was killed and several men had been buried. It was impossible to stir during the night, but in the early morning T. went round and extricated the half-buried. Most of the next day the Boches shelled again and it grew so heavy in the afternoon that T., M., and I—the only officers up—I. having been taken off the day before with bad shell shock—retired from H.Q. to a sort of drain pipe under the road, where we stood doubled up in water over our thigh gum-boots for two hours. (The other Coy. officers had stood the day before like this in the same place for six hours, and I don't know how they stood it.) Shells that burst near roared through the funnel and nearly blew one off one's legs. (It was in there that I. had been knocked out by the shock the day before.)

Then the water rose and we cleared out, not relishing the idea of being drowned as well as buried, which seemed possible, as one shell just overhead made the whole place shift. I made sure the Boches were going to attack at the end of it, and said so to T., who doubted it; but as it turned out they did actually give the signal for

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the assault, and began to get over. Meanwhile P.B. at Batt. H.Q. far back, thought we had put up a signal for help (which we couldn't do, wires being all cut) and he wired through to the gunners, who presently put up so terrific a barrage that the Boches instead of coming on bolted back—very luckily for us; and at the end of an artillery strafe of some hours, when night arrived, we were told that we should be relieved that night. They say the Boches suffered very heavily. I hope so, to make up for ours. Really the men were wonderful, as always. There was C Coy.—lads of twenty, many of them—planted out in burrows for thirty hours, plastered with shells—no communication —T. wouldn't let anybody stir by day. And at the end of it only two posts had broken at all—in one of which one was killed, three buried and unable to stir, and the others suffering from shell shock; and in the other they had all dug one another out two or three times before they gave way—besides having three wounded. Then we had the same scene as the night before—reliefs arriving and the wounded being brought down. M. bandaged and I administered laudanum and kola nut for hours.

Then Tatham went off and I moved the Coy. off in a hurricane of snow and icy rain. I'd been wet to the waist for about twenty-four hours, and I imagine the men were wetter, and I had no feeling in my legs for about two hours. They put

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whizz-bangs over us at one point in the open, but we got back to the support camp in the end, just at daylight. I sat up from 6 a.m. to 12 drying my drawers over a brazier (while the others slept) without any trousers on. Later at night we had to move again here, and I was left to bring the Coy. with M. We had to come across open country. Just as we started a terrific bombardment began on both sides, and in a tearing wind and rain we ran right into the Boche barrage and had to bustle through it. My idea was to try and find some shelter, and one of the sergeants positively urged it, but Sergeant C. said, 'No, sir, the best thing is to get on,' which accordingly we did. I knew Cousens was the better adviser, and we got through without any casualties and arrived here soon after midnight—wet through again after a most weary trudge. This morning we—the Batt.—were hauled out of bed to receive, I believe, the General's compliments; but he was detained at the last moment, so we didn't. But I believe the whole Brigade is to be patted on the back.<sup>1</sup>

9 p.m. Divisional orders have just come in, patting Batt. on back for its behaviour during this strafe. Several people are to be recommended for D.C.M.s and so forth, including Sergeant C., Corporal A. of my platoon, possibly M., who

<sup>1</sup> This bombardment took place at Hooge, as appears from Sir Douglas Haig's dispatch, dated 19 May, 1916, in which the Batt. is mentioned for its conduct on this occasion.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

helped some wounded down under fire. A. was the man who shot down the first advancing Boches, who, if he hadn't been at his post watching, might have started an entry for the lot.

I wish I felt really fit to lead these sort of men. I haven't had enough of it to feel really useful.

We're out again for some little time—I can't tell you exactly how long.

I don't know if this sort of account is interesting. It could be much more so if I could explain the sort of positions, but I have to avoid anything that could be construed into military information, and so I rather mix it up. It's extraordinary how one doesn't feel the worse for this sort of thing. I don't know when I've been colder or wetter for twenty-four hours: my teeth simply chattered with cold in that drain pipe, and sitting without your trousers for hours in a dug-out on a winter's day doesn't sound salubrious. But I am very well.

*Thursday.* Hope to get a bath to-day after a fortnight of being plastered with mud from head to foot.

*REST CAMP, Friday, February 18 (?)*

Yesterday we paraded for the G.O.C. Division, who made quite an eloquent speech, if rather inanimate; said the Batt. had added a new

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

laurel wreath to the Rifle Brigade and set a splendid example to the Batts. who had already benefited by it, under the hardest trial troops could endure, viz., concentrated shell-fire over many hours. It rather amused me to read in the paper next day an account of several little artillery engagements on the — front, which the men quite welcome as a change from the monotony of the trenches. Blithering idiot. If he had ever seen what remained of a Coy. coming out shattered and wounded and drenched and hungry, to tramp for hours through a snowstorm to some place where they can recuperate. Or if he had ever tried even ten minutes of fierce shell-fire. It's true the men stick it and make little of it, once it's all over; but the stoutest of them would probably give anything to be out of it at the time. Isn't there any imagination in those who stay at home that they can stand that sort of bosh in a leading London paper? I don't know why I'm being rhetorical.

The Brigadier, who followed the G.O.C., merely said, 'R.B.s, I'm not eloquent. I only want to tell you how proud I am of you and how pleased I am with you'—which the men seemed to prefer to the more elaborate oration.

I went in with C. this morning and had a bath—the first for over three weeks. I have never been so piggishly dirty before—my hair plastered with mud like a Papuan's; and I'm not clean after an hour's scrubbing in hot water. To-morrow I take

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two platoons in to be bathed and shall have another myself.

Have a slight sneeze and sniffle coming on, but you can't wonder at it, can you?

T., who draws not bad cartoons, has done one of me standing doubled up in the drain pipe, holding up the skirts of my Aquascutum out of the water—with a large shell in the act of coming through! He entitled his drawing, 'The only place where Vernède could not go to sleep.'

C. and I decided to recommend T. for a distinction, so we went to the C.O. about it and he informed us that he had already decided to send in his name for coolness and gallantry; so we hope he will get the D.S.O.

The stupid thing is that, as one realises out here, these honours go to the higher command as a matter of course and sometimes evade the lower to avoid giving too many away. War is very like Peace in that respect.

REST CAMP, *February 20.*

Not much news. There never is in these rest camps. We've had a fine day to-day—cold but bright, which is a nice change from the dismal Flanders weather. T. and F. have gone off on leave and I am left in charge of the Coy. for the time being with C. This isn't the same rest camp

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as the last—perhaps a trifle less muddy, but otherwise very simbly, and we live in a damp hut with a smoky brazier and are not supposed to move about much. I am sorry letters have been taking longer, and I'm afraid you will have had to wait several days for my account of the trenches; but you mustn't ever worry. You see, one is absolutely cut off at such times from posts. Your guess was about right as to the whereabouts; but you see we came off very well on the whole.

The Corps and Army Commanders have also tendered their thanks to the Batt., which shows we did something, I suppose.

I think there will be very fierce fighting for some time to come—both sides, I suppose, are fully armed now; and there is bound to be some up and down; but don't let any one make you downhearted. The men are endlessly gallant, and the higher command is bound to learn in time. Anyway we rest here for quite a long time probably and watch aeroplanes go over and get shot at. I have not seen one hit yet by either side. The papers are so complaisant over every little success that they are almost bound to be equally downhearted over every failure—don't believe them. Only believe that we shall win in the end.

I'm afraid I can't begin to think of leave for a couple of months more.

As to your question about Quartermasters: some of them do go up occasionally, not to the

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

trenches actually, but to what they call a 'dump' on the way there, and so far they undoubtedly run risks. Every road out here is liable to be shelled, and so far everybody takes his chance. But the man who takes chances all the time is the infantry soldier in the front trench of the worst sectors; and I don't think England can do too much for these little riflemen when they get home, if they get home.

*February 22.*

Am in the middle of a violent sneeze. As luck will have it, I've got to go with the other O.C.s and explore some trenches to-night—not for going into, but so as to know them when we do get into them. It would be quite interesting if I hadn't such a sneeze on, but I dare say being out all night will cure it; and I shall have my scarfs handy.

I'm lying in my valise to write this at 6 p.m. and I thought I would get a doze till 10, when we start, and it's decidedly warmer in the valise than out. These dark, damp huts with nothing but a smoky brazier for a few hours a day are well calculated to make one sneeze, even if I hadn't had twenty-four hours or more of wetness in that drain-pipe trench. I am sure decent comfort between whiles is what they want, and what neither we nor the men get in any sufficient quantity.

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9.15 p.m. Have dozed a certain amount and eaten a large meal, so can't be very bad. I expect I'll be back to-morrow in time to add to this before the post goes; but will put it into an envelope in case not.

23. Expedition all off at last moment, so that I got to bed all right and feel considerably better this morning. Nasty snowy day, though. Last night at 10 p.m. it was rather a fine scene—white snow on the ground freezing, and a moon that looked as if it had been crumpled by a large shell.

### *REST CAMP, February 24.*

Just a line to say my sneefle is fast disappearing. We're just moving to a new rest camp. Had an interesting day yesterday, which will tell you about in next letter. This is in haste to catch post.

### *February 25. (To his Mother.)*

It's bitterly cold, freezing hard and our hut is more like a funnel at the N. Pole than a residence —no door, and two holes instead of windows, and a very little coal-dust to make a fire with. We're all in the same boat, more or less, but it doesn't make it any warmer!

The Batt. had a lecture on discipline from an old General to-day—oh, lor, some of these old

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boys would haul up St George on his way back from fighting the Dragon in order to rebuke him for having some mud on his armour.

*Saturday, February 26.*

My cold is much better—going, in fact, as fast as you can expect in this benighted country, which at the moment is under several inches of snow. We've got a door to our hut, but still no windows so far, so we are still draughty. I ought to have a little more time for the next day or two, as D., who is senior subaltern in the Batt. and belongs to C Coy., has come back from leave and naturally takes over the O.C.ing till T. returns.

The only thing I can think of wanting is a pair of gloves as I've lost that good pair we got. Any sort would do as long as they are very large and woolly or otherwise lined. I use them not so much for warmth as for protecting my hands in the trenches. You pull yourself along like a monkey, and in the dark may lay hold of barbed wire, pointed stakes or sheer mud; or a combination of the same.

We had a lecture in discipline yesterday from a very Bigwig—it made me quite sick. I am still altogether up against that aspect of the Army—which I believe to be only a pale imitation of Teutonic methods, and if carried out rigidly, a

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

mistake. However, it's their say and they will have it, or try to have it.

I don't think I told you of my walk with the Acting C.O. and the other O.C.s to look at some other trenches. It was through a rather less desolate part of the country—sloping and green instead of smashed-up mud-holes; and we went near one of the recently captured trenches. Called on an old General at one place, and he asked the C.O. if he knew these trenches. The C.O. said, Yes, the Batt. had been there before; whereupon the old Thing just roared with laughter and said, 'Yes, but the Boches have got them all now!'

He was, however, not a bad old one—only cheery—seemed to know about things and be reasonably optimistic. We came back the last five miles in a six-horse artillery limber, and I don't think I've ever been so jolted in my life. It seemed a fairly good cure for colds.

*February 28.*

There's very little news. The snow has all gone and it is steadily sploshing with rain, and we're in the same rest camp as ever, and my cold is much betly but my throat is rather sore—to be truthful—but then so is everybody else's, I think.

I asked you for gloves, didn't I? Two pipes

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would also oblige. I've just broken the last again. That's the trouble out here.

I'm afraid I can't hold out any hopes of leave for a long time.

March to-morrow, so I suppose winter is thinking of coming to an end. I shan't be sorry. It's very difficult to keep oneself and the men fit in this sort of thing, and there never was a bigger lie than that colds are unknown at the Front. The absence of one is the rarity, I should say.

*March 1.*

I somehow fell asleep this afternoon instead of writing to you, and now there is no time before post goes.

It is a beautiful day—the first for weeks.

Have just seen a Seaforth Service Batt. go by to the pipes—to the attack, I think. Good-looking men.

T. is just back.

*REST CAMP, March 1.*

I sent you off a small snip to catch the post, and now I don't see why I shouldn't start a longer one. T., who has come back from leave rather ill—cold, I fancy—is asleep on my bed, C. reading, and a not bad fire in the hut, which is fairly peaceful.

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When we shall move I don't know—probably suddenly and soon. There are a lot of things in the air, and I wish I could always tell you what little we know and expect; but we mayn't, and anyhow it's just as well, perhaps, as they don't always come off.

I'm rather annoyed about leave and the time it will be before we can even think of it—apart from the chance of it being stopped altogether. I can't help thinking that married men ought to be given preference, because there are two people to be considered; and also, I think it should start at the bottom instead of the top. More decent somehow for a C.O. to see his juniors off before he goes himself, and I don't think this is just because I am a 2nd Lieut. However, it doesn't strike them that way—quite the contrary—and the men, of course, get much less leave than the officers. There, the sole excuse is that they are less used to it, make less good use of it, and so on—in which there is something, though not a great deal. Also, of course, the transport difficulties would crop up. I think myself the answer is that the officers should go less often. One didn't join to get leave.

I rather foresee a time (after Peace) when people will be sick of the name of the War—won't hear a word of it or anything connected with it. There seem to be such people now, and I see numbers of silly books and papers advertised as having nothing to do with the war. It's natural, perhaps,

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that soldiers should want a diversion, and even civilians; but I rather hope that people won't altogether forget it in our generation. That's what I wanted to say in the verses I began about—

Not in our time, O Lord, we now beseech Thee  
To grant us peace—the sword has bit too deep—

but never got on with. What I mean is that for us there can be no real forgetting. We have seen too much of it, known too many people's sorrow, felt it too much; to return to an existence in which it has no part. Not that one wants to be morbid about it later; but still less does one want to be as superficial as before. I fancy this comes from hearing — say, that the Army will be the place to be in when Peace is declared—no work, all leave and amusement. I don't think it will be or should be, and I'm sure it's a mistake to suppose that times ahead are going to be gay and easy in any case. The sword has bit too deep. He's only a boy and a very nice one and doesn't mean a quarter of what he says, but I do wish these nice and high-spirited youths learned as well as dared.

Every one here seems quite cheerful about Verdun, and rumour says that the French have done very well. It's quite likely, I suppose.

Am at present endeavouring to learn the Lewis gun, as we're all supposed to know a little of it. Like all machines, it seems to me very mysterious,

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though Lindsay<sup>1</sup> would probably know all about it in ten minutes. I think I should be less stupid at knowing good positions to fire it from, which is, I suppose, more the officer's job.

Bombs are fairly simple, though beastly. In fact I imagine they have made the war more cruel even than the artillery.

*March 2.* Fine day just turned to rain. Still don't know when we move. Nothing special on.

Still Rest Camp, *March 4.*

It is the most revolting weather again, snow and hail and rain alternately, and we are very lucky to be out of the trenches. You mustn't picture me suffering hardships, even in the trenches. It's only what you might call discomforts as long as one is well and unwounded, and really this hut has been much better the last two or three days, owing to more fuel.

Why we haven't gone into the trenches is that we are or were in reserve for an attack you probably will have read about. Luckily it was very successful and we didn't have to go up. I told you of the Scots marching up the road to the pipes. They were on their way to it, and the following day they came back—detachments with Boche

<sup>1</sup> Lindsay B. Fry, an engineer, my brother. C. H. V.

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prisoners—rather picturesque, and very conscious of having done well.

T. was much taken with my fur lining, which I lent him when he retired to my bed; it certainly is very nice and light.

I am just off to try to get a bath at a camp near—haven't had one for about three weeks, and am too dirty for words.

### *REST CAMP, March 6.*

We go up about two days hence to some different trenches, supposed to be a great improvement—or are rumoured to be so. Have been very lucky to be out during this awful weather. Have been digging drains this morning (physical drill at 7.30 !) in the snow and take the men to bathe this afternoon.

We only go into reserve anyhow for some days.

### *REST CAMP, March 7.*

It snowed last night, and wet snow which prevents anything being done, which is one advantage, as the ground is a mass of icy puddles. I hope it will improve before we go into the trenches. I am very well—slight sore throat, but every one has them.

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There wasn't any need to worry about that attack which we were not wanted for, as it went exactly as planned.

REST CAMP, *March 9.*

Beautiful day after hard frost—the ground really almost hard for the first time. Just to say we got up; but C. and I shall have a cushy job for next few days—making dug-outs in support. Should be very safe. No time to write to-day.

*March 10.*

I started off yesterday with two very nice letters from you and two platoons, and marched five miles in five hours to get to this place, which might be the middle of Plashes Wood, with flares going up and guns crackling in the distance. C., who had gone ahead, had vanished without securing a dug-out for us, and I meandered about till Heaven knows when, looking for one in the darksome *foret*. Eventually he turned up—midnight or so—and we had chocolate and whiskey (the only foods available) with D Coy., who are also here, and then re-hunted for a dug-out till we found one, where we lay extremely cold with the snow

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dripping around till the servants arrived with a blanket for each of us. Would one, for choice, sleep in a dug-out in the centre of Plashes Wood with deep snow and deeper mud all round, and some dripping thro' the roof, with one army blanket to cover one? Beestje cold, and as everybody started with a cold, it should be a Spartan cure. Was on duty from 6 a.m. to 8 a.m., and after that we set our platoon making dug-outs. If only one could keep one's feet dry it wouldn't be bad—quite picturesque—work easy and no shelling, bullets occasionally hit the trees overhead. This really is a wood—living trees, and there are other woods round, quite pretty. I have given your mother's scarf to Corpl. A., and found him sleeping in it last night when I looked into his dug-out. He seemed fearfully pleased with it, as he might be. We are going to mess with D Coy., at their request. For comfort I would much rather mess alone, as our two servants could and would look after us very well, but the invitation was well meant and I dare say a change of society is good.

*March 11.* Couldn't get this off last night and didn't get a letter from you.

C. has been ordered off to a course for a fortnight, so I shall have a dug-out and two platoons to myself and shall dig with them. I did some this morning and felt warmer at the end of it. The snow is melting fast. Am just sending off a

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line to my mother to ask her to make Cording send another pair of knee gum-boots, as mine have been lost, and they are fearfully useful in wet weather.

*March 12.*

It is a most beautiful day—the first of Spring, balmy and even hot in the sun—quite the nicest day I've spent in Flanders, in spite of the fact that I've re-started a cold in the head. It seems impossible not to have one. As soon as it subsides, something starts it again—usually wet feet, which are unavoidable. Still it is nothing but a cold in the head, and everybody has one.

There is an artillery strafe going on—not in this direction, I'm glad to say; but the guns are popping away like mad, and people on either side getting killed. We are, as it might be, in Hanging Wood, our front line where our well was, the Boches at Plashes. The ground from our front line to here is mostly dead, so that the Boches can't see anything: hence they have Taubes out all day trying to see what is going on. Whenever one comes over our sentry whistles and we stop work and take cover. I think they are bound to spot us, for the air is brilliantly clear, and the wood still quite leafless, but they don't seem to have done so up to now. Our guns always shoot at them;

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and it is a pretty sight, their aeroplanes like silver moths dodging between the white puffs of shell smoke in a blue sky.

The wood must have been quite a pretty one and isn't bad now. I sit in my dug-out, largely underground, and round the corner is a bomb store, then a field dressing station, H.Q., more stores, and dug-outs all along the rides. Everywhere there is evidence of the Tommy's thriflessness—sacks of meat stuffed into some corner to rot. If they could teach them thrift instead of smartness, it would pay.

Our dug-out building is going well, and they will be the best I have seen. The men work very well. And yet here we've been in this wood a year, and these will be the first decent dug-outs in it; those already up being sheer waste of labour. Just outside the wood there are the remains of a Boche aeroplane. E. and I went out to visit it yesterday, but sped back again as there were too many stray bullets about. In the distance you can see ruined and shattered farms and villages—skeletons.

Last night, after about nine hours' work (starting at 5 a.m.), I played bridge with D Coy. till 11 p.m. It's extraordinary all the people that pass through on business—machine gunners, sappers, F.O.O.s, trench mortar gangs, digging parties, doctors, Generals, stretcher-bearers and the wounded, who are brought down to the dressing

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

station next my dug-out. Two men of D Coy. were both shot through the chest by a sniper this morning : one walking down quite cheerfully. I really think the men are cheerful on being wounded; it shows what sort of a war it is. You wicked thing, reading my letters to strangers. Just remember that most people don't approve of hearing of the realities and it is not the thing to relate them. On the whole, a very decent feeling, I think. Moreover, most of the thrilling acts of the Front are written, or at any rate are said to be written, by members of the A.S.C. or R.A.M.C., or some other denomination that lives mostly miles behind the firing line. And relations of soldiers may know this, so don't give me away too much.

Now I must go out to D. for my tea. I am very comfortable and quite well really. I believe I stay here another week at least : then they say we rest and go to a much better part of the line.

*March 13.*

Another beautiful day and the cold again rapidly going. I trotted about the woods on duty (also chasing rats) with a pleasing D sergeant, till 11 p.m., after which — and — came and sat by my fire till 12.30 or so. They insisted on knowing my age, and guessed 32, so I must be ageing visibly,

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

but the truth almost agitated them, as something pertaining to their grandfathers. Both nice lads, desperately keen on being out of it. It is hard luck, I think, spending your youth at this sort of thing. However, we thought one another sporting!

My new servant has a wife and family—looks 20. I've just seen a letter in which he says he is pleased to say he is servant to a very good officer. Meant me to see it, of course. I must say he is an enormous improvement on the last, and has none of the old soldier tricks.

Our expert builders—pioneers as they are called—are rather after my own style of carpentry, and would craze Lindsay. They never saw two pieces of wood to fit, and if they want to measure anything, they'll tie a piece of stick and a piece of string together to measure by. Why they can't be taught their job properly I can't think. They get things done, but fearfully clumsily and never by rule or method, and any suggestion of making a dug-out comfortable they resent. I was absolutely snubbed by Cpl. — this morning, who said, 'What we looks to is protection from fire.' I meekly said, 'If you can get comfort too, why not?' But he only sniffed.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

SAME PLACE, *March 16.*

Last night, I'm sorry to say, I had a man wounded. We were collecting bricks at dusk from a ruined farm near, to roof our dug-out with, and as the men came in they would stand on top of the dug-out. Bullets fly mostly overhead at night, but several came jolly near, and I ducked, as I still cannot avoid doing, and said to Sergeant C. that I thought they were lower than usual and the men ought to clear down. He said, 'Oh, no, sir, they're over the trees.' However, I said to the men they'd better stand lower anyhow, and they'd begun to do it when flop went one of them, and Sergeant C. had the grace to say, 'It seems as if you were right, sir.' The man had got it in the eye and head, but I believe not seriously, and we got him down quick. He himself thought some one had thrown a brick at him and was rather annoyed. Probably lose his eye, poor man. But it was lucky no one else got it, as we were in a cluster of about five or six. It wasn't aimed, of course—only a stray—but I don't know that I should consider that if I were hit. These N.C.O.s, like C., absolutely scorn strays, but I think that's the mistake of being too valiant. Cpl. — is more or less head of the dug-out party. They are babies. He's supposed to be foreman, and works on one dug-out while another cpl. has

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another party doing another. He will not explain what he wants done to the others till they've put up a lot of stuff wrong. Then he makes them pull it down. I think it's to prevent their party going along as quick as his. However, I encourage the other party to disobey him, and they're both going very well. You'd think the measurements for a good sound dug-out would be standardised; but no, we have to invent our own as we go, and there are at least fifty useless ones in the wood that wouldn't stop a pea-shooter.

SAME PLACE, *March 18.*

Only time for a line, as I'm moving my platoon to another spot close by, said to be cushy. Move down to rest in three days.

*Sunday, March 19.*

The gum-boots arrived in the middle of last night, and are excessively nice and useful, as the damp remains in spite of very balmy, pleasant weather. I am still in a wood—rather a nice place and safe, I think, as the Boches aren't supposed to have spotted it, and it's not front line at all. It's a small post which I hold with my platoon, and we're going to sleep by day and work by night

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improving it. Have quite a decent dug-out, with my servant hard by in another; Sergt. C. and Cpl. D. a little farther away—both good men. We ought not to come in for any strafing at all, and I hope we shall not.

Some sappers have just shown themselves on the sky-line about 200 yds. away and been whizz-banged, some wounded. Some of the men are hopelessly careless.

The enclosed two letters from Marchetti<sup>1</sup> and Knowles respectively are rather sad, aren't they? He was a very nice youth, and I always thought it particularly sporting of him, being Greek. He was quite intelligent enough to know the bloodiness of it all, but as I wrote to Knowles, he probably would have thought it good enough. You might keep Marchetti's letter in case his people care to have it, as it must have been about the last he wrote. I'll try and send them a line.

I also enclose a letter from the wife of a rifleman to whom I wrote on the death of her husband. She's got me mixed up with T., who, I told her, got her husband down and looked after him.

I enclose a letter from the R.N.C.O. anthologist.<sup>2</sup> I'm rather glad to know an authority on Navy matters like 'England to the Sea.'

<sup>1</sup> 2nd Lt. A. Marchetti, killed in action 15 March, 1916.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Geoffrey Callender, who wrote asking to be allowed to include 'England to the Sea' in an anthology he was editing for the Royal Naval College, Osborne. (*Realms of Melody*, pub. Macmillan and Co.)

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

I got two letters from you in the middle of the night as I came in from perambulating my wood. It was bright and moon-lighty, and except for the ceaseless crack of rifles, a pleasant hour to read them. What a sharp one you are! I've been trying to conceal about the deerskin waistcoat for ages. It was one of the first things stolen at the rest village, before we started for the trenches, which I was keeping it for. Taken from the bottom of a bag by some one. A sad loss, but luckily the weather is now such that one isn't likely to think of such things for months to come. I've been almost too warm the last day or two.

The only drawback to this place is that there's no water in it, and so far I have not even washed my face; and I am also reduced to rum in my tea instead of milk, which is also absent. Not at all bad—tea and rum—and it's extraordinary how the men delight in it. It's almost enough to melt a teetotaler.

The chief interest here is watching aircraft and not letting them spot you. It's rather pretty seeing a squadron in the sky all among the puff-balls of smoke. Yesterday I saw one of ours hit, and it was most exciting to see if he could clear the wood and come down safely. He did. But only just. Hits seem very rare, considering.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*March 21.*

We go out to-night to rest—it is rumoured—for three weeks. It really has been a very cushy time, and I've rather enjoyed my private command and the building work. The guns of either side are popping away over us, and we lying doggo in the middle, so to speak, though why we haven't been spotted I can't think. There was a Fokker over us most of the day yesterday, and I spent the time watching him through Mr Clarke's glasses.

Had about five hours' sleep the night before last and seven hours last night—being waked about seven times in the course of it. It's extraordinary how one gets used to going to sleep again: at least I do, whether it's midday or midnight, I'm glad to say; and I don't feel at all sleepy, which is just as well, as on these moves one may not arrive till 2 o'clock in the morning.

Have had lunch since writing the above, cooked by my servant. He is not a chef, but really the food supplies are always very good, even when the *cordon bleu* deals severely with them. Now and again one pops out to see how near the shells are bursting—an aid to the digestion! A blackbird sang in an oak last night, as in one of my poems. I notice several of the men write home to say how they enjoy the birds singing. It is a nice change from high explosives.

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Yesterday I had — in to lunch. He's a machine-gunner nowadays—not attached, but wandering about the Division with his guns. He's a nice youth, far more intelligent than most of them, but very simple. He corresponds, moreover, with my ideas of a gentleman, which all Regular officers do not by any means. He's a good judge of character too—a thing I find most of them blind about. They recognise their like and rejoice in the young apes, and that is about all. Of course their like is pretty good; but what they want, and what England in general wants, is an acknowledgment that the less conventional folk are not fools or criminals.

Same date. Still in the wood. A little later.

I seem to have become a tremenjus letter writer, while waiting here to be relieved; and besides a letter to you, which I fear won't get posted till to-morrow, I've written to Frdk., Oscar, and Arthur,<sup>1</sup> and now I'm beginning another letter to you again. Not that there's anything to tell you—spunk go the bullets in the trees and a machine-gun runs like a swift typewriter, and the flares go up and sich is life. Oh, and a bomber bombs too in the distance. Shan't be in bed till 3 a.m., I guess, and was up at 2 a.m., and also at 5-6 a.m.

<sup>1</sup> See introduction.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

this morning. There's toil for you—but as a matter of fact there is little to do or to worry one here; and keeping awake a good deal is the hardest part of one's job. — has already gone off with my kit. The servants travel separately with a small handcart. I think I must try and break him of a habit of loudly whistling as he brings in the food. I think it's shyness chiefly.

*March 21, 1916.*

[To F.G.S.]

A wood in Flanders. Subaltern visible in dug-out.

I write with the shells going past from either side, we being safely out of it in the middle of a wood. We go down to-night to rest for some considerable time, and unless shelled on the road should be asleep in our beds behind the lines somewhere about 3 a.m. It's really been a cushy time since the last strafe.

Rather sad about Marchetti, isn't it? I got a letter from him one night to say he had joined the — Batt, and one from K. the next to say he'd been killed instantly while taking up his first working party. I liked him. He was intelligent and cheerful, and to die for a country you admire, though it is not your own, seems extra gallantry.

I think some arm-chair criticism by somebody

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who has been out should be most salutary. I suppose one is bound to get a biggish residue of confirmed shirkers in a country that has been taught to hate militarism and has not been taught to realise war. As for Peers—they will be Peers, I suppose. Nothing beats me more often than the fact that not only Peers but whole classes of men have never even heard of the things which you and I think are the things. I doubt if — ever heard of Henry James, for example, but he breeds West Highland terriers enthusiastically enough. We at least acknowledge the existence of West Highland terriers.

I wish we were rather more open to ideas. I'm thinking of shell-proof dug-outs at the moment —their value and the absence of them for no ascertainable reason, except that we are so happy-go-lucky. They go with the Henry James, almost, and the way you wear your cap-badge with the West Highland terriers. And war is war, and the amateur view of it wrong. There should be no amateurs of war—there, at any rate, the Boches are right.

These views are prompted by some mud blowing over from the last shell, and may not be as pondered as they should be. Anyhow, I'd best come to an end for the present. Do hurry up and get well, Fred.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*March 22.*

Arrived after a peaceful but most weary walk at 3 a.m. Bed at 4. Heavy bombing at 4.30, for what seemed hours. Go farther from the line to-morrow.

REST VILLAGE, *March 24.*

We've got here, all very tired, after doing about ten miles in eight hours! Snowing again, bust it, but lucky we are here, quite comfortable. I have a bed by myself in a farmhouse, and we mess in another. Gum-boots invaluable in the snow.

*March 25 or 26.*

I sent you off a scrap yesterday, and I don't rightly know that I've got any more news for you to-day. We really are rather in luck to be out of the snow in quite a comfortable farm, and it's to be hoped that by the end of the month, when we move on, it will be spring again. Said to be a very cushy sector. I told you I had a bed—very comfortable in a small brick-floored room off the farm kitchen. I get hot coffee in the morning, which is rather luxurious; and the people are cheery, which is pleasant, when you are thrust upon them.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*March 27.*

Heard last night that my leave starts on 29th, which means that I shall be back some time on 30th. I don't go into the trenches in between, so there should be no question about this—except for the ordinary intervention of Providence.

I get seven clear days in England apparently.

*Sunday, April 9.*

Here I am back again where I told you, and things seem to have gone fairly well, though two of D Coy. officers seem to have managed to get slightly injured in the time. I got back rather brilliantly, really. Neither of the others turned up, and the crossing was excellent, as I wrote in my card from Boulogne, where later I saw the *Sussex* just below me with the whole of her stern blown off. Didn't leave till 7.30 p.m. and arrived at my first possible station about 12, but only woke up to find the train about to move out, so got out at the next one, which anyway was nearer. Pitch dark and no knowledge from anybody as to where the Batt. was, and another youth of the Brigade and I got the R.T.O. Cpl. to find us beds, which he did in a cottage opposite—quite good bed and breakfast at 8 a.m., and pay 'ce que vous voulez,' after which we got on to a hay waggon,

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meandered along the road till I met a Transport Corporal, who told me where the Batt. was, and took my pack for me. Got in about 10 a.m., and was able to laugh at the other two old soldiers who had not applied at the War Office, had started the day before, and had wandered about all night trying to find the Batt., which is at present out of the trenches in support. It's a beautiful sunny day, and if it weren't for the noise of guns would be a very nice day for trotting about.

*Monday.* Couldn't get finished for the post, which went off soon after I arrived. Another beautiful morning. I have a hut to myself. My little Blighters mostly seem to be flourishing. We don't go into actual trenches for several days, but have working parties—nothing like so bad though as t'other place. The wood is beginning to look green in parts and the sun shines. The land is wonderfully tilled—more forward than ours—the women, I suppose, doing most of the work.

### THE TRENCHES (IN RESERVE). *April 12.*

It's just slopping down on to the hut tent arrangement in which I set in a wood, and the damp is very considerable. So, however, is the peacefulness, which is a most pleasant change from the part of the line we used to be in. You'd hardly realise here that you were in the firing zone, except

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for an occasional noise of guns, and at the end of a few days we go back into camp again. I've never had such a quiet working party as I conducted the night before last—two shells a couple of hundred yards away and that was all. I dare say it was a good thing to start in a really bad bit; and I don't think I exaggerated it as a new-comer, for — was saying yesterday that even last winter—the first winter—didn't compare with it from the point of view of unpleasantness, even allowing for the much longer time they used to spend in the trenches.

I don't think there is much news—we haven't really done anything and I expect we shan't.

Horticulture has begun among the troops, and consists chiefly of digging up violets and cowslips and sticking them in the roofs of their dug-outs, together with a suitable inscription and a few boughs of palm or something similar. I'm not quite sure that I'm able to admire it, but it serves to amuse them, I suppose, if it does nothing else.

*April 13.*

Got your first real letter last night. The sun is shining at intervals this morning, though I'm afraid it's going to rain again. Nothing at all to tell you since yesterday. D. has gone off to his staff job and T. and I are alone in the wood, M.

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occupying a post elsewhere, C. having been lent temporarily to another Coy.

Now I must censor some platoon letters and then go and see some work the men are doing. It is most peaceful here and I hope will remain so. Don't go properly into the trenches until the end of next week.

*April 14.*

I had another peaceful working party last night, tho' further along the line I'm afraid one of our Coys. got it rather. Raining again, bust it.

*April 15.*

The working parties seem most peaceful so far, and quite pleasant nights.

*April 18.*

We have got back to rest camp, arriving last night; but it doesn't amount to much—the same working parties and a good deal further to go. The Boches have been rather more active with our trenches too, bust them, but it can't be helped. Also I get the job nightly, being the only subaltern left in the Coy. at present. Our casualties haven't been many though. One of our officers had a very

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lucky wound yesterday—shrapnel burst right over him in the trench and he was only hit twice in the hand—once right through the palm, the other knocking a finger nearly off. That really is lucky, and he went off very well pleased with himself.

Must finish this quick as there's much work in the rest camp.

*April 20.*

To-day is bright and windy and, I think, threatening snow. I never saw such a *pays*. It poured all last night—hail and hurricane. Luckily I had nothing to do either by day or night, and played bridge after dinner.

I cannot quite chuck my cold—it's no worse, but remains muddy, and this morning I distinctly feel a slight sensation of what might be lumbago. Comes from sleeping in draughty floors in this yowling weather, I suppose. Very slight and nothing to worry about.

I'll try and give you a plan of day's doings next time, if there are any doings. But really and truly they are very dull. People roll into your hut and roll out again. I got up late for breakfast—censored letters and read a short story book by O. Henry, who is really very good—had lunch and a bath in the afternoon—hot shower bath in a dirty little hut—more reading—dinner—bridge. A lazy and luxurious day.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*Good Friday, April 26.*

Yesterday I wrote you a fairly long and, I expect, a fairly dull letter, at the end of which my back became so lumbagoey that I had to call in the Medicine Man, who rubbed me with something and put on a mustard plaster, and this morning it's a good deal better, though not quite gone. It makes one feel about 95—to be put on in two pieces at an angle of 45 deg. I suppose it's these beestje winds and lying on a draughty floor. T. and I dined together—it being B.'s turn to take the working party, luckily, as I could not have done it. Then I got into bed with my hot bottle (used for the first time, and very pleasant) and read *The Woman in White* till about 11, when I slept. This morning it is fine, but cold and windy, and I think detestable. I fancy we go up on Easter Sunday, by which time I should be all right again. I haven't 'gone sick' once yet, and don't want to; I prefer to leave it to the Babes and not have it attributed to my venerable years! Which it isn't, as, at no age, did cold and mud agree with me.

*Easter Sunday*

It's fine after about three days' incessant rain, and my back is distinctly better, tho' somewhat weakly in parts still. Also the cold is better to-day.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

Some warm weather would probably make them both vanish. I've really hardly been out of this hut since the first day, as my back was not conducive to walking about, nor was the rain; and so my news really and truly is limited. D. and C. both returned yesterday; so now we shall have our full complement of officers in C Coy.—six, in fact.

A Lieut. named Butler came to dinner—quite an amusing man—I believe he's a Fellow of St John's, Oxford, but didn't cross-examine him—one of the clever family of Butlers. He intelligently talked a lot of nonsense.

Bother, I've been interrupted, and now there isn't much time to write before post goes. I know there were several things I wanted to tell you, but can't recall them.

*Easter Monday.*

Just a line from the *tranchées*, which are exceedingly damp—but, so far, very quiet. By the time you get this I shall in all probability be out again, as I have been selected as the next victim for the Technical school, which, I think, I told you about. This means being away for a fortnight, roughly, learning how to form fours, etc. The C.O. almost apologised for sending me, and said if I find it too impossible, would I let him know; but he thought

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it might amuse me. I said if it was to be regarded merely as copy, perhaps it might. So there we are, and the only consolation is that you needn't worry for a fortnight. Back nearly well—cold much better. It's not a special insult being sent to this place—an officer has to go about monthly from the Batt.; it's merely fatuous, and you're liable to be pounced on if you've seen the doctor, as I had for my back. I am too sleepy to write, having only had two-and-a-half hours last night.

*April 26.*

Rode over to this place yesterday from the trenches. Lovely day to-day but am so sleepy from the trenches and having a day of exercise that I'm hardly awake enough to write coherently. Back practically cured, and cold very near it. I have a room in a farmhouse (rather like our larder): the other fourteen officers in tents. I think it will be fairly amusing and good for me, perhaps, because I shan't be able to think I'm more incompetent than the subalterns of other regiments—judging from those present. Will write more to-morrow. Here for a fortnight—far from the strafe.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*Thursday, April 27.*

Still nice weather, but almost too sleepy for words—and early rising and many parades; that's all my news really and truly. There's a rum collection of temporary officers here—some very pleasant. I don't think there's anything they teach one that I don't know about—which fact I'm rather glad to know, as never having been to one of these places, I thought I might be even more iggerant than I am. I sleep very peacefully in my farm bed, and we take our meals in a hut together. The rest of it is rather like Dotheboys Hall—winder—W-I-N-D-E-R—go and clean the winders. We are a rum people.

I feel quite youthful, however, as there are several gray-headed officers at the school. I can't write to you—am very well—it's just slipsiness. I rather fancy our trenches were strafed a bit yesterday, but haven't heard details.

*April 28.*

Still nice weather. We are working very hard all day, doing all military lore in a fortnight in the most muddle-headed way.

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*Sunday, April 30. Still at School.*

You have been mingled in letters from this place, but the effect of being lectured all day is extremely soporific, and so is the weather, which continues very nice. The day before yesterday your parcel arrived. The cake I shall start at tea—it won't last long with twenty of us!

Now I'll tell you about yesterday as it was rather more newsful than the rest of the week. Started with a run, then lectures (the British Army ought to wear a bumble bee as a cap-badge !) then lunch; then walked into the nearest town with the sub-commandant. A good-looking man, very like a pirate-captain to look at. In the town we met the two youths I mentioned as being pleasant, and had tea together in a tea shop at 2 fr. each, if you please, for a very mingling tea; then went to have our hairs cut, and with great difficulty found a little Belgian barber in a small side street, who undertook the job in a back sitting-room with a pair of shears such as tailors use to cut heavy cloth with. From there made for the only two baths we could find. Keeping two small zinc baths is a regular occupation in this sort of one-horse town—they are planted down in the sort of shed the Standon barber shaves his clients in, with two women to fetch the water in pails, and a queue of British soldiers waiting to plunge in at 1 fr. 25 each. Not unprofitable either!

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

Then walked back—had dinner and went early to bed, hoping to sleep till about 10 a.m. to-day. Instead, the Boches chose to gas us. I'm rather pleased to have had a mild taste of it, as apparently gas attacks are to be expected all the summer when the wind is favourable. What happened was that at 12.45 midnight I heard a terrific bombardment open, followed by the gas alarm signals, in the distance, which is considerable. Being very sleepy and fairly sure that we were not gassable here, I went to sleep again, hoping it was not the R.B.s getting it. Twenty minutes later I woke to hear some one shouting 'Get on your gas helmets at once,' and to find my room full of gas, which was pouring into the window and not, of course, going out again. Bustled into helmet, which is very difficult to adjust properly to pyjamas, and heard the captain in the next room coughing and choking and calling for another helmet. Took him my reserve one just in time, I think. His servant was crouching on the floor in a great fright; and the pirate captain was cheerily dressing in the next room—all the doors opening in on the one room. Bustled out as soon as possible in pyjamas and aquascutum and stood about in the night air while the gas blew by. Of course it was exceedingly dissipated when it got here, but it took twenty minutes to float by, and was quite unpleasant, especially in the house, and shows how vital these unpleasant helmets are.

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I got quite a headache in the twenty minutes, besides breathing like a grampus. Found a farm hand wandering about without one, but the Commandant assured me that these Belgians have all acquired them, mostly by theft from our men, and will risk going about in the gas without them just in order to get another from some charitable person!

Nobody suffered here—except from want of sleep—as we stood to for four hours after that, the men playing football from 3—5 a.m.; a thing which I am sure would annoy the Boches if they could see it. We hear this morning that the attack was a failure—and mostly on our left—but apparently a good many people and cows have been gassed—including some in the next farm.

As I say, it's just as well to have tried it mildly like this, as it leaves one none the worse and considerably wiser. It was an extraordinarily bright idea of the Boches, and the first use of it must have been exceedingly ghastly for us.

Am very fitly now, and the only nuisance is that my eyes are still tiresome and the right one will see black spots at intervals.

*May 3.*

We've had a beautiful warm morning followed by a thunderstorm, which has made it cooler. I shan't mind how hot it keeps.

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It's funny being up here—in sound of the guns and within reach of the gas—quite safely and listening to interminable lectures. The line of country through which the gas passed is rather curious—the clover blackened and killed as if by a hard frost—75 per cent. of the cows knocked out, and so on.

Some of the lectures, by experts, are interesting, and we had a most excellent first-aid lecture—quite the best I've heard on that subject.

(To his Mother.) *April 30.*

I'm afraid I've been a very bad correspondent since I returned from my leave, and don't think I've ever thanked for the very nice parcel you sent. But somehow coming back to this existence put me off letter-writing, and now I'm at a school some way behind the lines doing a sort of general course. The school being here, somebody has to be sent from each Battalion in the Division every month, and it came to my turn this time. The weather is very nice, and, of course, it is healthier than the trenches: otherwise I think I prefer the latter, as I fear I never did like schools at any time, and find them as boring as ever in my old age. However, it's rather a different sort from most, and last night, or at 1 a.m. this morning, we were gassed in bed, and had to struggle choking

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into those smoke helmets and hustle out in our pyjamas. The Germans certainly do have some nasty ideas.

I think there are some pretty hot times ahead, but don't get worried by newspaper reports or lack of letters.

Now I think I'd better drore to a close, with much love to my best of mothers and all the others. I think I'm beginning to agree with Dr Watts, that we were not made to bark and bite like dogs.

*May 4.*

Am here for another week, and then I believe the Batt. is out for some time, so cushiness is ahead.

*Saturday, May 6.*

I have put you off with minking scrabs. It's still most beautiful weather, largely wasted sitting in a stuffy hut listening to balderdash. However, it is very nice and I hope it'll continue. C Coy. won't be in the trenches for at least ten days, I suppose, tho' there may be a working party or so to take up towards the middle of next week.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*Sunday 7.*

The Irish business is rather sickening. It makes me disgusted to see these papers going on with their party politics over everything. Personally, I greatly doubt if any Government of any sort is going to finish this war. The Army is going to do it by its intelligent giving of battle, and I wish there were more intelligence. Still, there's probably more than one thinks sometimes.

*May 9.*

Just a line to say I've arrived back at the Coy. in a wood—out of which we go almost at once into a still quieter place. Rode back from the school yesterday in a pouring rain at the end of my examination, which did not strain my brain excessively.

T. is on leave and D. just going. We don't seem to have had many casualties at all, and the Batt. did not get that gas which we did.

*May 12.*

Here we are in a rest camp, and I got up at 9 and had a hot bath and shaved and dressed outside in a beautiful summer atmosphere, which made it

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the pleasantest rising I've yet had out here. I rather fancy no *tranchées* for some time, but one's never quite sure about that.

I'm going to borrow a horse if I can and ride in to — this afternoon, and buy myself some boots.

This camp is a series of huts side by side on a hill, and you see everybody all day. I have already chatted with about twenty officers and men this morning.

*May 14.*

The country here has changed extraordinarily in the last month—all the leaves out and the trees flourishing again. The day before yesterday I rode into the big town near here thro' a village about the size of Puckeridge that is mostly ruined by shells. It was strange to see babies rolling about among the fallen bricks and mortar, and old women sitting out in the sun beside the remains of their cottages. How these old people must hate the Germans, whom they have seen twice bringing desolation upon them. This morning I started at 9.30 a.m. with two others to inspect a place the Batt. might have to go to in an emergency. We went by muddy lanes and tracks (it rained nearly twenty-four hours yesterday) and emerged on the place, which is a field full of orchids and forget-me-nots in deep wet grass—rather pleasant

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and peaceful—though it wouldn't be if we had to go there as a Batt., for the Boches would probably do some shelling. Then we came back by the main road through rather a pretty little country town that has also been terribly shelled. There was a big girls' school at one end of it—half in ruins. I don't know when that happened—whether it was at the start of the war or not, and whether the demoiselles had to flee hurriedly along the roads as did so many other folk round here.

All the small shops in this sort of place have been turned into small grocery shops for the Tommies—and you see announcements like 'Coffee and Chipps,' or 'Egs—Milk—Buter—Chipps.' Chipps are, I suppose, potatoes, and always seem to be purchasable. You see Tommies sitting with their legs dangling out of top-floor windows—windows as once was—and guns nosing out of barns, and an armoured car, perhaps, half sunk in a flower bed, waiting for the Push.

Fine weather makes the country far pleasanter—it's stiffly laid out in avenues of trees like the maps they use at Hythe, and it certainly makes war seem more fantastic and unreal.

Got back, had lunch, and then a hot shower bath. The shower-baths consist of a place quite as small as the Billygoat's house, in which there is just room for two people to stand together, and you generally have to wait half an hour to get in.

The old soldiers whose time is up are rather

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annoyed at being compelled to serve on—not unnaturally, perhaps—but it is obvious that they cannot be spared, being each worth several recruits.

I can't write interesting letters. The sort of enforced slackness plus the idea that you must not say anything the censor might object to, rather dulls me.

(To his Mother.) *May 14.*

This is my wedding day. I went for a longish walk through muddy lanes and shelled villages. The weather has turned wet again, otherwise the country would be looking rather pretty—all the trees in leaf, and orchids and kingcups and forget-me-nots blooming in the meadows. In fact, it is looking pretty—in a formal way and where it isn't ruined. Some of the hedges, for instance, have autumn tints instead of spring ones, caused by the gas passing through them.

Yesterday I went for a ride to the largest town in the neighbourhood—again through shelled villages where babies still sprawl among the ruins. The Company gee has taken to stumbling of late, bother him, otherwise he is a fine powerful beast and jumps well. Of course on *pavé* especially stumbling is a great nuisance.

Are you keeping fit? My sister will want to collect a Red Cross fund for herself if she does much more severe work.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*May 17.*

Just going up—a beautiful day.

*May 18 (I think).*

It's a perfect day and I'm seated outside my dug-out in shorts made from my breeches cut down, shirt and gum-boots, not to mention tin hat and tie.

My servant is really very good—quiet but most useful and attentive. He has just baled out about ten buckets of water out of my dug-out (below the floor) and he does this about twice a day. Just as he finished, two Riflemen came up and were disappointed to find none left as they wanted to make tea with it! Apparently the bottom of my dug-out is also a drinking water reservoir. This is quite a good dry trench. I was up from the time of arrival till 4 a.m. this morning but have the rest of the day to sleep in. Have already seen this morning the Brigadier, I., D., a new padre attached to the Batt., who is a brother of A. B., and several other people who have been up through the *tranchées*. Very quiet, I'm glad to say—only aeroplanes being strafed overhead. T. said he went to the trench exhibition in London when he was home on leave, and found he had never seen anything at all like it before. Some old soldiers apparently show people round, and while he—

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T. in mufti—was explaining the workings of a Lewis gun to a friend, an old gentleman said crushingly, ‘If you’ll kindly allow this soldier’ (pointing to an attendant) ‘to explain the gun, we shall all benefit by it.’

I think this is the 20th May. It’s still beautiful weather, and if the Boches would cease whizz-banging it would not be unpleasant sitting in the trenches. At the moment I’ve retired to my dug-out, which, I think, is whizz-bang proof, and two martens are trying to flutter in at the door. I don’t know if they’ve inspected it in my absence and decided they would like to build there. The frogs—green ones—are yulling from a rather stagnant pond just behind, and birds are cheeping around. Cpl. A. has just gone by carrying some timber for a gas-proof dug-out which he and I are constructing by the aid of our united brains. This is a few minutes later, and the Boches have left off whizz-banging. Since lunch-time I have been listening to I., chatting about ‘Intelligence,’ in the Company dug-out, and falling asleep at intervals. When he got up to go off, I pulled myself together and came over here to write. Not that I have very much to tell you. Oh dear, I’ve got to shoot off to censor the men’s letters. You needn’t picture strafes at present.

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*Monday, May 22.*

I am still rather sleepy from a seventeen hour day, started by being on duty from 2.30 a.m.—7.30 a.m. In the course of it we got a few whizz-bangs over—only a very few slight hits—and in the evening the unfortunate M. tried to blow himself and two other men up with a rifle grenade—none of them serious, however, luckily. It was a case in which I might almost be accused of the evil eye, for at the moment I was standing with Sergeant B. about 50 yds. away, saying, 'I dislike rifle grenades. I always expect them to blow up everybody round and I never expect them to blow up the Boches.' Which happened the next instant; but, as I say, it was a lucky business on the whole. Having started at 2.30 on Sunday morning I came off at 3.30 a.m. this morning and slept till 12, when some bumping on the next line woke me. Still beautifully warm, and I go about with bare legs and shorts, which isn't bad in May, is it? On the whole, this is a very nice trench and simply doesn't bear comparison with Hooge, so far as I've seen it. I am very fit—and the eyes very fairly good.

Here in the early morning one sees jays and pheasants and lots of smaller birds, and green frogs, and heaps of rats, and a semi-wild cat occasionally. I imagine wild life is on the increase,

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because the No Man's Land is becoming rather jungly, and except for the shells, of course, very peaceful. So is the country immediately behind the trenches.

One of my platoon, who was always writing home to say he was in the thick of it (when he wasn't), has been hit slightly and will be enormously happy, I think, to go home with tales of the peril.

*May 23 (?).*

Another scrap, but I have such long nights somehow—only three hours' sleep last night—that one dozes off most of the day and is not, as you know, particularly brilliant! S.—of the Buffs—whom I met at the Technical School, came up last night and spent last night with us. I had coffee with an artillery officer at 7.30 a.m., breakfast with S., lunch with D.—all visitors to the trenches. It's a heavy, still day—very quiet, a thunderstorm due, I think.

T. has gone off (temporarily) to the Divisional Staff, but I'm afraid they'll keep him when they find out that he is good.

We shall be out by the time you get this for several days—almost double the usual.

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*May 26.*

Just a line from camp. Very damp march. Breakfasted at 11 to-day and post goes at 12. Nice weather again after very sloshy night.

*May 28.*

As I have had a whole night in bed, being the first for about ten days, I ought to be able to write more than a mere scrap. The weather is very pleasant and the honeysuckle is coming out in the wood, and yesterday I picked a bunch of yellow irises, buttercups, and a lot of new young red foliage of oak and sycamore. The only drawback to being out of the trenches is the quantity of working parties, which are a bore, but roll on, as the riflemen say.

A.B.<sup>1</sup> has been appointed to the O.C. ship of C Coy. in Tatham's absence.

A youth in my platoon who was in the — wrote in a letter I had to censor that he wished he was back in the — as the Batt. was a wash-out, all wrong. I had to send for him and ask if he thought it a polite thing to say of his Batt., and discovered, of course, that he resents the stricter discipline. I tried to explain that it wasn't done

<sup>1</sup> Captain Andrew Buxton, The Rifle Brigade, killed in action, June, 1917.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

for fun entirely, but to beat the enemy, but I'm not sure if I convinced him. Discipline is an infernal bore. There is no doubt that some of the new Batts. are not particular enough about really vital matters, and the men don't of themselves seem able to distinguish what you must be strict about and what you mustn't. If only one could reduce discipline to its absolutely necessary elements and insist on those only, we should be nearer the ideal.

D. goes off on a gun course to-day which will leave us short again, with the corresponding extra work. I don't know why they can't keep an extra subaltern or two when there are such hundreds about.

*Tuesday, 29 or 30.*

Rather stupid of them to send — to the —, but it is the sort of thing that happens. If anybody gets hit they are quite likely to be sent out again to some different Batt., which I think is a great mistake.

I didn't have a working party last night and had another good sleep instead, but there seems a fair amount doing this morning, which does not leave me very much time to write before the post goes at 2 o'clock.

*Mr Faniel—a copy thereof—is being passed*

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round the Batt. with an inscription (by the D youth, I fancy) : 'To all officers—for information and necessary action,' which is one of the Orderly Room phrases attached to reports.

I feel as if I wrote you the dullest letters and can't help it, and Frdk.'s statement that my letters are the most interesting reading he has at present is an unblushing lie, unless indeed he reads nothing else, which is quite likely.

*Still Tuesday.*

I wish I could write you nice letters like you write me; but when I take up the pencil I seem to be just as dull as when I don't, or duller.

The sun has come out and it's not a bad day. Working party to-night, blow it, as I don't amuse myself much digging in the dark, though I like it by day.

31. Working party no bad last night—fine night—told off the sappers successfully. Another party to-night, bust it. I'll have to finish this tomorrow.

*June 1.* Have to send this off in a hurry, and I meant it to be a long one, but was out till 2 a.m. and busy this morning. Have you seen the Batt. mentioned in despatches?

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*June 2.*

I had to hustle off a letter yesterday which I had meant to be a long one, as there was not much time left. We spent the morning dodging shrapnel which the unpleasant Boches put over what should have been our sequestered spot. Both B. brothers and Brown were nearly laid out, being within a few feet, and we were all within a few yards. The padre had one bullet put through a letter he had just written to his wife and found another in his surplice. Souvenirs! In the afternoon I went for a ride on the Coy. horse, who skidded on his nose for about twenty yards on the way back. Luckily I had just decided that he was going to fall, so managed to jerk him up again. It's a troublesome trick in a fine horse otherwise. He used to belong to Prince Arthur of Connaught. After tea I started a trench in which to get if any more shrapnel came along; also had my hair cut, but no digging party at night.

To-day we move—not exactly into the trenches, but not far off.

Our guns are making a horrible row, deafening one, which accounts for the spasmodicalness of this.

Did you see the new C.-in-C.s' despatch (in the papers on Tuesday last)? It's not very exciting, but it describes the attack at Hooge and the Batt. is mentioned. The list of those mentioned looks

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

long, but as a matter of fact there is only one other in our Division mentioned, so it is an honour of sorts. It's still beautiful weather.

*June 4.*

It is my birthday. It's a little cooler to-day but not bad, and as a matter of fact the nights are the more important, as that is when we work. There is very much to do, which I like, as it's less boring to have work, and we also have some small excitements—were whizz-banged yesterday and had a great artillery display last night—over our heads almost entirely. 'Noise, noise, noise !'

My servant is on leave and I realise how good he is now that I'm doing with somebody else. Cpl. A. has been made a Sergt., and we are furiously putting up really good dug-outs together. Some shells are coming over, bust the Boches ! The noise puts me off.

*Still June 4.*

I am ashamed of my scrabs, tho' it really is a little difficult at times, what with candles and other people jabbering and slipsiness and such—not to mention being an idle letter writer at the best of times.

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The weather has turned suddenly muddy, bust it, as it's very easy to be too cool in the trenches even in summer.

*June 5.* Not much done yet and very near post time. It's turned Aprilly to-day—sharp showers and sunshine.

*June 7.*

Peaceful day for me to-day—Brown being on to-night. I got to bed at 3 a.m., having trotted about since 9 p.m. yesterday. The men are working very well and the only trouble is that we don't stay long enough to finish things properly.

Yes, awkward about that Boche gain. A place I sat in quietly for four days with my platoon was, I believe, heaped with dead bodies—ours and theirs.

I suppose the Navy business was much better than it seemed at first, and at any rate there wasn't the glib boasting that takes off from some of our other efforts. The main disappointment is that they didn't, and probably couldn't, deliver the sort of blow that might really have hastened the conclusion of the war, for I suppose if Germany had lost her Fleet, she would have had to resign the more absurd of her pretensions. The proportion of killed is rather awful: otherwise the casualties are no more than the armies lose in a day's fighting that practically goes unrecorded.

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*June 9.*

This will somehow have to be a scrap, as we have been working all the morning instead of last night, which was very wet. Two padres just come into the dug-out and the jabber is incessant.

*June 10.*

Out to-day—a mild showery April one. Got to bed at 3 a.m. to the sound of distant firing, and am not as vigilant as I ought to be when writing to you. We had a fairly exciting day yesterday. Some aggravating gunners, two of them Colonels, who ought to have known better, came into the trench unbeknown to us and began observing over the parapet by day—a thing we have been at the utmost pains to prevent our men doing for days past. Just as we found them there, dancing happily about with field-glasses and things, the Boches spotted them too, and opened with whizz-bangs and H.E. Quite hot for half an hour, but nobody hit luckily, though the trench was bashed in in parts—the annoying thing is that they have now marked it down as a suitable target. In the evening I had a man hit by a machine-gun and had to roll rapidly down a steep bank in the dark to avoid it myself. Still, it's a very nice change from the last place, especially when one

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thinks of what is going on there now—of which we only get the light in the sky and the heavy boom of the guns.

*June 12.*

The weather has turned to a horrible wet cold slop and it's more like November than June.

One sees a few roses in shelled gardens climbing among shattered bricks, and the wild flowers are rather numerous in the parts where nobody dare go to cut the hay, and it's too dangerous to pasture animals. Yes, Sgt. A. has got the M.C., and also Sgt. W., and some of the others may get it for Hooge yet.

The naval news seems to grow better daily.

I think Howard<sup>1</sup> is justified in his grouse, but, of course, it is even more so in the Regular Batts. and the plums are very strictly preserved. I think before the war ends, the system will have to be altered, or we shall find ourselves working on the odd and probably disastrous view that three months at Sandhurst is more valuable than two years at the Front. However, we generally do end by surrendering our cherished stupidities before it is too late.

<sup>1</sup> Sub-Lieut. Howard Fry, Howe Batt., Royal Naval Division, killed in action, November 16, 1916, my brother.—C. H. V.

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*June 14.*

I hope you aren't getting this awful wintry weather. Here there has been heavy rain for about four days on end, and we are extremely lucky to be out of the trenches for it, as it is even stopping work at present. I had one night of it till 3 a.m., the last one-and-a-half hours returning at a walk in a limber—all the men wet through long before—and I don't want any more. The country is so wet that when I rode with D. to a gas lecture we got our horses in up to the chest and had to leave the road for 100 yds. or more, where it was hopelessly bogged—about 10 ft. deep. That was yesterday afternoon. This afternoon I have been talking 'gas' to the platoon, and told them that if any of No. 12 ever got gassed they would be put on a charge—which pleased them, I think.

1 p.m. It's clearing a little and much I like the sun. The padre has just asked me to go for a ride with him, so if I can get a horse this will have to stop.

*June 15.*

It hasn't rained to-day but is beastje cold, and I shall put on my fur-lining for working party to-night. We go and return in a lorry, which

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makes it a lot better for the men, who always hate to have a long march thrown in. Yesterday I went for a ride with Padre Buxton. We had a very nice ride for three hours. I rode a pack animal —rather a nice beast, sturdy, but with a very hard mouth, like most of them. No stumbling, however, which is a great advantage. We had tea at a nice French shop and were joined by the doctor, who rode back with us. Then we changed our time at 11 p.m. and are now the same as you again, I suppose—an hour earlier.

B. has (temporarily) taken on the bomb squad which was offered to me, but I rather jibbed at it. It means leaving your own platoon and also dealing with weapons which I know I should be absent-minded about at intervals, and I don't altogether believe in being turned on to any mortal thing, whether you're suited for it or not, merely because the authorities don't try to find out who is suited for what, though one doesn't like to refuse if it lets some one else equally unwilling in for it. However, I did offer myself as victim before, and let B. have it this time, as he said he didn't mind in the least. They probably have forty trained bomb officers waiting at Sheppey, forgetting things as fast as they learn them !

There seems to be next to no news of the Salient in the papers. The Canadians seem to have had a lot of casualties. But every one is very cheerful over the Russian news, and the war, as usual, is

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going to end in a month or two. I'm afraid leave is going through very slowly this time, and it's very hard luck on the men. One Sergeant was telling me yesterday that he's only had four days since war started. It's not economy, considering what a strain it puts on everybody, and I don't think people realise that this is a war where for the first time almost there is no rest from risking one's life and limbs—least of all, of course, for the rifleman.

I suppose there are bound to be many and violent happenings this year (not that I know of any).

*June 17.*

The weather has turned fine again, which is rather pleasant, but on the other hand we had one of these middle-of-the-night alarms, gas helmets on, prepare to go up, and all the rest of it, amid a terrific noise of guns, which makes one fairly sleepy next morning. Nothing came of it except sleeping in one's clothes. Also yesterday we had an accident by which one of our best sergeants lost his life. Poor youth, he was a very brisk, well-made, gallant young sergeant, and I remember thinking several times when I happened to be watching him in days past that it was particularly unpleasant to think of any one so splendidly built being knocked to atoms by some of these

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devilish machines—as I saw him yesterday. He was telling me a few days ago that he was going to apply for a commission. It's very sad, and I don't think one gets used to these things.

Every one is very cheerful about the war at present.

This is written in snatches of a very fussy morning.

*Sunday 18.*

I really am rather hustled to-day and didn't have much time yesterday. Went to Sergt. —'s funeral—about three hours—very impressive—the C Coy. officers acting as chief mourners—came back and had a working party till 4.30 a.m. this morning, since when I've mostly slept. Trenches to-night, so I'm glad I slept most of the morning and had a hot bath; but I've very little time for writing. I've still got to make up accounts—I must stop. I shall probably have more time the next few days. I hope so. Nice weather again.

*Monday, June 20, or else Tuesday 21.  
(Really Wednesday, June 21!)*

I got two lines started to you yesterday, and do feel as if I were treating you badly, sending meagre scrabs instead of the long letter I thought

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might come. But the time I expected didn't come either. We're fairly quiet but excessively busy, and this is the fifth night I haven't been to bed till 3.30 a.m. to 5 a.m., which is too late for me. Coming in was very boring. We had a gas alarm the moment we were up, but no gas—against which we are taking great precautions.

D. is a nice youth, I think, but, of course, being quite fresh to it can't be expected quite to pull his weight for a few days, and, anyhow, we are short handed again as C. is taking over another job temporarily.

A.B., when he sees a meal approaching, dashes out to look at something and comes back an hour later, and you may be thankful if he hasn't dragged you with him! But he's very intelligent and pleasant.

My friend Shafto of the Buffs has got the M.C. for a very gallant deed. I heard this from H., whom I met in the dark on a working party last night. A very pleasing lad.

Very few shells so far, but it's been beestje cold—almost freezing at night and a sort of sunless blight by day.

Why — gets ten days' leave I can't tell. I wish I could.

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*June 22.*

Got to bed at 3 a.m. this morning—on duty 7 a.m.—10 a.m. and 11 a.m.—12. Shelled for ten minutes then. On duty again to-night 7 p.m.—2 a.m. and from 4 a.m.—7 a.m., and probably shan't get to sleep between. So you may imagine I am getting fairly sleepy. This isn't so much grousing as explaining why letters are so muddily small, but you'll forgive it, won't you?

Out when you get this. Possible change from this part. Mostly quiet except for ten minutes this morning by very heavy shells which rather daze me. Man next me was shivering and quivering the whole time. Nobody hurt. We are exceptionally busy. Last night I was wiring in front for about three hours and had a party of men cutting the long grass with sickles—mostly on their stomachs. Rum scene in the moonlight. I always did detest barbed wire.

I am desperately afraid that this smidge or another equally scribbly smidge will be your birthday letter.

*June 25.*

I'm afraid even three lines really are quite difficult at present, as even if I wrote them (and we have been terribly hustled lately) they aren't always possible to get off. It's a beautiful day to-day and we are at —, somewhere quite safe at all events.

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*June 26.*

The men are all splendidly cheerful at present and it does one good to watch them at play. It's raining again after a fine Sunday. We are at the same safe place, I think for some little time. We are living in great luxury—strawberries and cream.

*June 27.*

It poured last night and nearly flooded us out. No news.

*June 28.*

I do hope that letters are not going to be stopped, as you suggest. I should think that is only one of the many rumours that get about.

It's just hopelessly wet. We're still at the same place. I had a gallop round a fine big field yesterday and then played rounders and then wrestled with A.D.—we each won one round; after which, I am thankful to say, he had sprained his thumb, as in the second one he fell heavily upon me and weighs about fourteen stones.

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*June 30.*

A letter from you to-day, which shows the posts haven't stopped this side at any rate.

Had quite a pleasant day working party yesterday behind the lines, and played rounders with the men in the evening. Pulled out of bed in middle of night on false alarm, then back again. To-day cold but fine. Shall probably go into nearest town after tea and have hot bath.

*July 1.*

Your letters keep coming and I hope my letters keep going. Good news to-day. I expect you'll have heard of it. Not in yet for several days. Weather beautiful.

*July 2.*

It's a beautiful day again to-day, Sunday, and we shift a bit, but our nearest town is still the same as when I was last on leave, which, I think, is not giving away military information.

Yesterday I inspected a flying place with C., and if we had got there an hour earlier might have had a ride, which it seems rather absurd not to have had hitherto—not that I think that I should take to the things at all.

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The mess gets on very well together. A. D. is so merry and cheerful that he is invaluable at most times. He spends his time seeing that his elders' ties are straight. He is our only boy, and the great value of boys out here is that they can be so much more mercurial than other people—which the men like, being babes themselves. The whole army is a collection of brave babies.

I suppose for the next few months there are bound to be doings.

This is a hop country and the hops are 15 feet high and rather pleasing. Beautiful sunset last night.

*July 3.*

Beautiful weather and the news seems good so far.

*July 4.*

Weather fit, self fit. Nothing doing here much. We had a Coy. photograph taken at the last place and I will try and send you a copy.

My servant has gone sick, I am sorry to say.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*July 5.*

Heavy rain yesterday, but good night's rest. Lots of rumours flying about, but nothing substantial. Very quiet for us so far. There is a small Bilien goat in the camp here which wanders into the huts to eat things. Rather a pingly one but not bad.

I saw a passage the other day which I expect you know and like. It's something about—'Be brave and endure for the Lord will protect you until you have finished the service that He requires of you'—something like that, rather fine and suitable for a soldier.<sup>1</sup>

*July 6.*

Another fine day. Had a rotten time last night. Brown and I took up a working party and some fools of gunners started shelling the Boches, who retaliated while the trench was full of our workers. Result very unfortunate, including the wounding of another of our best sergeants—a horrible wound in the thigh. Brown quite good and cool—self quite good and cool. Went down with sergeant and stretcher-bearers at the end of it—an awful trek for hours—got him off about 4 a.m. and myself to bed at 5 a.m. Lots of men do awfully well on

<sup>1</sup> He sent the reference later, 1 Chron. xxviii. 20, saying, 'Not quite as I thought, but very much.'

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these occasions, but there should not be any such. No time for more. The poor sergeant was engaged —has been out nearly two years and will surely lose his leg if not his life. He was awfully patient going down.

*July 7.*

Just a line to say very fit. Nasty muddy weather again. Much sleep last night. We really get our news from the papers, so you hear before we do. Sergeant A. has been made platoon sergeant of 11 platoon, which means I lose him, I regret to say, but I still have the best N.C.O.s.

*July 8.*

I am so sorry to see Huddart has been killed. He was such a nice fellow and they seemed so very happy together. I suppose it was in the advance.

It's a beautiful day, and I'm sitting in the remains of a huge cellar of a farm not far from the front lines. We got here yesterday after being shelled for about half an hour where we were at the farm. The old farmer's wife and a girl-hand spent the time trying to drive their cows into a shed—mostly under shrapnel fire.

I never saw such coolness and stupidity. Of course whenever a shell fell near the cows scattered,

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

and the women, after a shriek, chased them and got a shell on the other side. Meanwhile the British Army crouched under a wall, sensibly enough. Two cows and a calf were hit, and I expected to see both the women laid out, and shouted in vain to them to leave the cows. They simply would not.

We marched up here through a very bulletty area; but once arrived, it's rather nice, and I have the best dug-out I've ever had, very nearly shell-proof, I should say. There's a moat and ruins of barns and cellars amid which we live with the shells planking around and a continual rattle of machine-guns at night. Two Australian officers came in here an hour ago for a drink—pleasant simple souls from Gallipoli and Egypt.

Spent the morning with Brown counting the contents of a dump. I may send back some more kit sometime, if we move, so don't be surprised if you see it arrive.

*July 9.*

It's another beautiful day, but no letter from you. But praps I shall get two to-night—about 1 a.m.—which is when I get it here. There is a moat below my dug-out with green frogs in it. I don't think I have any news. I take my platoon out at night to work in gum-boots in a very muddy

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

ditch, much sniped; but we rather like it as we are on our own without the assistance of any R.E.s, who are always tussome.

This afternoon we had a few shells, after which I took up my N.C.O.s to see our ditch by daylight; and we crawled about on our stomachs in a hot sun and got quite warm, which is very pleasant. Brown, the two Buxtons, and I are the only mess in this particular ruin, but I have entertained on whiskey and soda-water to-day P. B., K. (Adjutant), O.C. A Coy., M., and several others. Sich is life. D. complained of our absence of leave—quite rightly, I think. One in 8-9 months is not really fair. However, the men get less and grouse very little.

Tell my mother I really will try to write soon. It's bad not to, but I got so sleepy with night work and don't want to get really short in case one had to make an extra effort.

*July 11.*

I got your last night's letter about 4 a.m. this morning after what was an interesting night and for some people a very exciting one. C., with two other officers, led a raiding party into the Boche trenches. The party had been training down below and came up in the moonlight to where we are, as it were, among the ruins of Plashes farm buildings, with

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blacked faces and labels on their backs—to help recognise one another in the dark—and armed with knob-kerries and axes and any weapon of their fancy, and stood about till the light, or rather the dark, was right for the fray. Cpl. —, a great hulking savage child, pressed into my hand three packets of woodbines as a parting gift (in case he didn't come back) for a friend of his. They were a fine collection of cheery, excited ruffians, picked volunteers, and went off amid many good lucks. Meanwhile I had to get two platoons into a trench we had been hastily digging in case the Boches retaliated with a heavy bombardment, which they did. I sat with them there for about one-and-a-half hours while the ground shook and crash followed crash. Then the raiders trooped back, having done very well. They got into the Boche trenches, the Boches fled, and they burgled their dug-out and rushed back with only one or two casualties. Unfortunately one of D Coy. officers and one of our very best stretcher-bearers were killed after they'd got back into our trench, by a *Minenwerfer*—very bad luck.

Then we had the raiders back in our dug-out to have drinks, all of them with different stories of what had happened and how many Boches they had killed, and adventures in the wire, and the nature of the Boche trenches. Then the casualties arrived. I fancy I got to bed about 7 a.m.; but I was too sleepy to be sure. Slept till 2 p.m.,

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and am so far having a peaceful day. I don't much approve of these raids—you take too many risks to achieve a doubtful end. Still, it went all right, which is satisfactory.

Tell my mother not to worry. I don't suppose the Push is very much worse than anything else really, and so far we are not in it.

*July 10.*

Another nice day and I did get two letters from you at about midnight when coming in from digging. No news at all—the general outlook seems good, doesn't it? I have just lent Frdk.'s rifle<sup>1</sup> to E. to do some sniping with. He is a very fine shot and stationed at present where sniping is possible. Poor youth, he has two brothers wounded this month, and one may be killed apparently, but he doesn't know.

Must stop at this point.

*July 12.*

I enclose two photographs—one of the Coy. and one of 11 and 12 platoons, taken at a farm we were at, some way back, a fortnight ago. I have pointed out the leading lights.

I am sorry to say that Say, one of the men hit

<sup>1</sup> A telescopic sighted rifle lent him by Frdk.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

on the raid, and once a corporal in my platoon, has died since, leaving a wife and two children. He was a very fine fellow. K., who brought him in, said Say implored him not to do it lest K. should get hit. The doctor, too, said he was one of the best patients he had seen. It seems to me the children of such a man should have every chance. He was very cool and quiet-mannered, and would have done extremely well, I think. Last night Brown had another of our corporals shot through the heart—also about 22 and married, with children.

There is an awful waste of our best men just at present; but I suppose it can't be helped.

*July 14.*

I send you a letter pretty often though I have no news to send. I fear one Batt. got badly hit and you will see some names shortly.

I meant to write reams to you, but I have to chuck it right now. I'm going to try and answer your letters later.

*July 15.*

Our part here is lined with *Minenwerfers*, and Cpl. D. and six men nearly got laid out by one to-day. A tiny bit fell on my knuckle about 300 yds. away,

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

but one gets too many souvenirs of that sort to keep them.

I think the idea of being censored makes me so dull.

*Sunday 16.* Now I shan't get a very long letter written after all. Had a rather exciting carrying party last night up a road full of *Minenwerfer* holes and got in, changing camp, at 4 a.m. As a result I have just got up for lunch instead of breakfast and the post goes at 2.

Here we are, back in the farm where the women herd the cows among the shells. I'm with Brown in one of those bivouac covers, very nice in nice weather, but somewhat damply in Flanders.

*July 16.*

Another working party to-night—probably till 5 a.m.—so that I don't suppose I shall wake up in time to write you much of a letter to-morrow, as I intended to do, not expecting the party to-night. I do not like being up so late, especially along a bulletty road, but sich is life. Haig is reported to have complimented the Division on the way it has worked and been bombarded up here, while the strafe goes on down south. Nice of Vaughan to write. I am glad he was left out of it. His Batt. must have had a specially bad time, having to retreat—always the worst part.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

We are in the same hut as a fortnight ago, C and D officers together, the same gramophone tunes going (but one officer less—the one who was killed); everybody the same, except that war seems more in the air, and they talk of how to spike guns and such things. I think there is going to be little rest now for any one till the war has taken a different turn for the Boches. It's a strange atmosphere, artificial in a way—the zest to kill and all that, but necessary, I suppose. I wish I could get up more of it.

One of D Coy. Sgts. has been recommended for a V.C.—Sgt. Smith—he was twice wounded in the second line on the night of the raid, and went twice through a barrage to fetch stretcher-bearers—quite good work.

*July 17.* Got home at 3 a.m. after all. Two separate bullets between Sgt. E. and self, who were walking side by side! We both looked at t'other to see who was hit. However, no harm to anybody at all and slept till 12. To-night there should be a boost on and I am hoping to watch it from a high hill. Will tell you if I do.

Sgt. M., the one I took down the other day, has written to Sgt. E. to say he's going on very well on the whole, and asking him to thank me for my attentions. Nice of him, as he must still be very bad, I should think.

*July 18.* Thought I would keep this a second day and tell you about the strafe as seen from the

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

hill. As a matter of fact I was rather disappointed. It was a fine night (after the hottest day we've had) with the moon drifting behind tiny clouds, and a dozen of us sat in the open watching shells burst—ours a couple of miles away and some of theirs just behind us. Tremendous noise, of course. We set fire to two houses behind the German lines within the first five minutes and they did not retaliate effectively. The red flashes of the bursts and the crashing sounds were rather terrible, but did not compare with the same when you are marching beneath them, I thought.

To-day is bitly cold. The news still seems good. Just post time. No letter from you, perhaps two to-morrow.

*July 19.*

Just a line to say I'm very fit. Three letters arrived for me from you to-day. Please thank my mother for her parcel when you write—all the things were good.

It's a nice day again after a dull one. Much shooting in the night.

*July 21.*

It is a very nice day, and so was yesterday, though on neither, so far, have I got a letter from you. However, I expect some to-day. I expect

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with all this fighting going on there simply isn't room to carry mails in trains and steamers. We are sitting once more as in the photograph—what next I don't know, and as there is supposed to be an extra strict censorship, couldn't tell you if I did.

At present C Coy. is rather annoyed. You heard about the Paris review of troops the other day. Well, the 3rd R.B.s represented our Division at it, and our best N.C.O.s represented the 3rd R.B.s and went off expecting a tremendous good time. Instead of which they were barely let out of barracks the whole time they were there—with the result that they took French leave one night and went to a box at the theatre and were all put on a charge when they got back. Some reprimanded and several reverted to the ranks exactly when their value might be inestimable. Discipline! Here were these men just come out of a raid and with two years' fighting behind them, kept as if they were prisoners. The consequence of it all is that we are short of N.C.O.s and have to appoint young or inadequate ones to take the place of these tried ones. It isn't good enough. Oh for a little elasticity in the Army.

I do hope you are getting this nice weather. I think it will make the waiting a little less depressing.

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*July 23.*

Here's the post going off at a moment's notice. It's fine weather and I have a new servant, my last one having got his discharge. The new one is a Manchester guttersnipe called 'Ginger'—you would love him. Looks about 15 and has been out about fifteen months—unutterably cheeky. He offered himself for the job. I'll try and write a proper letter to-morrow.

*July 23.*

I sent you a small scrap to-day because the post corporal, who is a silly little very mournful wisp of a man (who also cuts hair and sniffles over you as he does it), chose to send word at 11.15 a.m. that all letters had to be sent off at 11 a.m. And I was only down late after the third most maddening night of mosquito biting.

Before I forget, I have sent back Frdk.'s rifle in the case together with my MS. book. We never know now where we shall be next, so the less kit we have the better.

We are in a rather nice farm with a nice old farmer who congratulated me on the beauty of my French accent, which was rather tactful of him, as the accent is the only possible merit of my French.

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— seems to have lost heavily. I am afraid these newer Batts. lose more heavily even than they need, for experience at this game is the only thing that counts for much, it seems to me.

By the way, until this strafe is over, I don't fancy any one hit would be kept here over twenty-four hours. Everybody seems to go back like lightning. It's strange how warlike the air is—every night the noise of heavy bombardment: the roads crowded with troops, rumours flying in every direction. And all this land in the meantime is ripening to the harvest—corn getting yellow, the hops climbing sky-high, the hay in cocks, and broad beans six feet high. To-day was a beautiful day—a hot sun and a fresh breeze. Brown and I walked into — to buy things for the mess basket: we purchased from a charming French maiden, and sent our goods back—five miles—by two orderlies, one my new servant, Ginger.

*July 28. (Really 26.—C.H.V.)*

It may be the 28th or not, but I'm writing in bed just before snoring off and I'm rather vague about it.

It's still rather nice weather—in quite a different part from the last: in fact, we seem to be on the move, and I suppose some day shall get to the centre of things: but for the next six days I am

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on a bayonet course (!) in order to qualify as a Batt. instructor. This rather amusing, with the greatest battle of the world going on, but like us. C Coy. had to send an officer and only Brown and I were available, and Brown wasn't keen, so I offered myself, tho' I'm afraid some physical drill is included, which I detest. Five hours' bayonet fighting a day for a week ought to make me rather fit, and, as you know, I rather fancy myself with it, but shall probably want to correct the instructor most of the time. Last night we spent in a train till 2.30 a.m., when we started to march twenty miles—stopped for breakfast at 5 a.m., after which Brown and I, alone of the Batt., bathed in a rather nice river just below us. It ran about five miles an hour and one could only just prevent oneself from being carried down. Cold but rather nice in the middle of a long march. Got to our destination about 12 noon, and I am in bed on the floor of a very small farm in a kind of Collier's-End village—the farm kept by a very ancient and smiling Frenchwoman, who is horrified because B. and C. insist on sleeping in the garden. My French is getting terribly bad and fluent, and I bargain for hens and cream and make jokes in French. I had about twenty minutes' chat with a charming, dirty, small girl of about eight, who wanted to sell me *gateaux*, but was quite happy to talk instead. She told me exactly where we were going—which was more than we knew ourselves.

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As usual, not being able to describe things exactly puts me off, but it can't be helped.

It's rather amusing how the modern Malbrouck (like A. D.)—*s'en va-t-en guerre*—with *John Bull*, *London Opinion*, a pound of chocolates, a bag of greengages, and the utmost light-heartedness, on the seat of his compartment beside him.

Did I tell you that — has been made Adjutant? And there are people like — and —, men of 30 and 35, with every intellectual distinction and the habit of command and organisation in the Batt., and yet baby boys who have spent four months at Sandhurst have to be tried first at what is not the simplest job in the world. However, I'm not girding at things—though I do think it will take longer to win while we go on in that way.

Must sleep now.

*July 27 (?) Thursday (?)*

I believe there are extra stringent regulations about what is put in letters at present, so I feel rather as though one is not at liberty even to say it's a fine day, which it is. I ought to be getting rather fit with eight hours' bayoneting a day, and I think I am; but am also rather annoyed with the instructor—a Sgt.-Major of some other

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regiment who is rather impertinent. I don't know how I shall get on with him as the days roll by, tho' it's absurd quarrelling with anybody but Boches at present, and I shall endeavour not to.

A funny little rosy-faced midget of a Frenchman rolled in to-day to say that some of our men had stolen his espalier apples, and I had a long conversation with him in a sort of French, and the padre gave him some almond toffee, and he went off after shaking us by the hand warmly with the statement that he should consider the apples as a 'souvenir' for the troops. Poor little man, they were apples that would weigh a *livre* each and last till March.

Some of the French people can be very annoying. I discovered a very good *vin ordinaire* at an *estaminet* in sealed bottles; and some very bad in unsealed bottles. I bought the sealed bottles and returned them empty at their request. Next time the servant was given the sealed bottles I had returned filled with the inferior wine.

We have rather an amusing staff at present : —'s servant is a musical comedy star of sorts and quite amusing. He came to me last night and told me that Ginger—my little guttersnipe—had had toothache for three days and nights and wouldn't say anything about it, and would I see to it. So I sent Ginger to the doctor, who pulled out his largest tooth before breakfast and then

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gave him M. and D.—which means carry on with your usual work—which meant a long day's march in the sun. Some of the Army doctors are awfully inconsiderate, I think. The poor little wretch hadn't slept for three nights apparently, and anybody could see that he looked ill as a result of it. Luckily, Buxton let him off for the day; but he gets told he's too sentimental.

I must to bed—I had breakfast at 8 a.m. and it's 11.30 now—very late!

Frdk. is absurd about the paid job. He ought to know as well as anybody that in war more than in most things people can't be paid according to their works, and it's therefore excellent if somebody who really has got the capacity gets some sort of reward for it. However, nothing will persuade him, I suppose.

*Saturday, July 29.*

I am afraid my last letter will be rather late, as this is the third time in a fortnight that the rat of a post corporal has told us one time for collecting letters and then taken them at another. And now I have nothing to tell you. It is still very beautiful weather and we are still here, and I am still bayonet-fighting. Haven't quarrelled any further with the Sgt.-Major, who is more respectful in his manners, and am getting very fit. I breakfast at 8, bayonet-

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fight from 9—12 and 2-4, and then feel considerably sleepy, apart from having letters to censor, which takes a long time and is rather dull.

The back gardens of these cottages are about half an acre large and well-stocked, but very weedy. Of course they sell us vegetables at high prices.

Brown and I are just setting off to a village three kilometres away, as we have the afternoon off, and this will have to close as Brown wants to start early to catch the cashier and get money out of him.

Will try and send something better to-morrow.

*July 30.*

It's Sunday and a most beautiful day—very hot sun and very nice air, and I am sitting in the garden all by my lone, as the Batt. has gone off on a Field Day, and I, being supposedly on a special course, am taking advantage of the fact that there is no bayonet-fighting to-day to do nothing at all. So that I really have got time to write.

The country round is rather nice—the village in a steep valley with a stream half the width of the Rib through it, marshland on one side and parkland on the other, rising steadily to a kind of downs which, not being too well cultivated at present, are full of wild flowers. Several of these

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I haven't seen before—especially one or two campanulas—new to me, but I dare say not rare.

The men have a bathing pool or two in the stream and like it much. The British Tommy is like the pig—just as clean as he is allowed to be.

A. D., who is a lively youth, spends his time scrapping with me in the mess, who spend my time trying to persuade him that if he hadn't been to Eton and Sandhurst some glimmer of sense might remain with him. He's really not unpleasing at all.

Just had to move into the shade of an apple tree out of the sun, so you see how warm it is.

The Paris episode has died down now. They simply could not afford to lose the sergeants. Of course you have to bear in mind that the older soldiers take these things philosophically as being the Army all over. The trouble is that there are not going to be old soldiers for very much longer—only old officers, and the new wine will be forced into the old bottles by the old Sandhurst system because that system has been artificially preserved by rapid promotion, which prevents it from suffering the normal casualties.

Do you see the lad Anderson has got the Military Cross for a raid he did? I thought he would show himself pretty competent and gallant.

I am almost as hot as if I were in India! The old lady next door has just told me it was too hot, but I said 'No.'

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Very distant but continual noise of guns.

It is quite extraordinary to see the sort of military articles and sketches that go down in some of the papers. I saw one on soldier servants in the — by some one who stated that his servant even built a dug-out for him when he went into the trenches. A decent dug-out takes about ten men to build, working several hours several days; and the idea merely indicates that the writer has never been out of England. The same with half these reported conversations with the men back from the Push : they don't even suggest the sort of attitude the men take towards the whole thing. And the undoubted gallantry is far too much insisted on in order to cover up the shortage of organisation and forethought that so often goes with it. I don't want to seem critical, but one does want to let it out sometimes, and I know you won't mind listening.

These courses such as Howard has embarked on are rather quaint. Of course, it's the same with me at present. I ought to be handling my platoon instead of learning the bayonet; and the other officer learning it is a Regular who has had about fifteen years of it before, I suppose, but the instructor must have a class, so off you go to it, whether you are expert or not.

Naturally, there are some new tips. I don't happen to agree with most of them; and it will be rather like having to instruct the men to cut

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

their balls at tennis instead of driving them—a painful duty.

*August 1.*

I wrote you two lines this morning and just missed the little post-corporal, who announced that he was taking the letters about five minutes before he took them, and then scuttled off down a track through thistles 10 feet high, like the white rabbit. I sent my servant in pursuit, but he failed to catch him; hence this letter, which may be a little longer but not much. I'm writing it in my valise in a tent on the top of a bare hill by the light of a very flickering candle. Eric<sup>1</sup> not far off I dare say. It's really hot weather now: men fainting by the way from heat, so you may imagine I'm rather well suited by it. We're not in anything so far. It's very difficult to write by this bougie. Guns in the distance. I must say good-night now, I think, and see if I can add a line in the morning when I believe we go early to bathe like the Spartans.

2. No time. Just going to bathe.

*August 2.*

Just a line to say still no news. Not a bad bathe this morning in the river, somewhat coloured by the rest of the Battalion. I am on a Court-martial

<sup>1</sup> Capt. T. E. Le Blanc Smith, M.C., R.F.A.

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to-morrow. It's a picturesque place this—many troops in view—bands, concerts, football going on, and in the distance the crack of the guns. I must stop now.

*August 3.*

Still another beautiful day and still nothing doing. I spent four hours court-martialling—no deserters, I'm glad to say; but I did not enjoy it for the same reasons as Frdk. used not to at Sheppey. Tell him he might do a very useful work revising the Army Code and the general powers committed to the casual judge. There are some sentences that may be necessary, as a matter of course, and the question of guilty or not guilty seems seldom difficult, but when the punishment varies between a month and three years in prison, and the decision is left to amateurs of justice, somebody is sure to suffer.

Sgt. — has not been well and I find he was laid up last year with some chest trouble (caught from old French lady where he was billeted) and warned by the doctor to 'look after himself' in case consumption followed. As if a man could look after himself out here. It seems strange in so splendidly-built a man, and one of the added horrors of war.

A captain in a Scottish regiment is coming to dinner. It's just about to come on the table,

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made of old ammunition boxes, in the open, on the side of a down. Beautifully warm—band playing—five-course dinner—sunset in crimson dust, and always the infernal crash of the guns.

*August 4.*

I have no news to give you. Nothing doing. Practised an attack before breakfast; spent the morning teaching the Coy. the latest style of bayonet-fighting; had a ride this afternoon among barbed wire and trenches with Brown, who was thrown by the Coy. horse; tea; lecture by the G.O.C.; dinner; went out with Buxton to watch a great strafe that is going on; came back; corrected platoon letters, and am now writing to you.

My mother's parcel has arrived—very welcome—also the gauze netting; just at the moment the mosquitoes are off, frightened by the guns, perhaps! But it will be very useful if they return. The noise is very distracting.

Must sleep now. The baynit course isn't keeping me back at all. It's sort of extra.

*Sunday, August 6.*

At the moment of writing I am a-setting in my valise once more, and two padres are sitting on the next valise having supper at 10.30 p.m. after

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a round of services. The Buxton Brer and the Methody parson, a Cambridge man. It has been a nice day, very hot sun but cold wind : everybody is peeling under it, and one's knees in shorts are quite painfully burnt. I started the day by bathing with the Coy. at 7.30 a.m.—somewhat cool; a Brigade church parade at 10; after lunch, sleep; after tea a long walk with Brown and the doctor; then dinner and correcting platoon letters; then writing to you, then more sleep.

I am sorry to say the doctor has sent Sgt. —— down, strongly suspected of consumption. It's awful to think of in so fine a fellow. I saw him just before he went. He has promised to let me know how he goes. He thinks he'll be back in a couple of days, but the doctor says not for this war. I would rather have lost half the platoon, but it can't be helped.

Still nothing doing. I teach the baynit and we practise digging and such things. I got a letter from Frdk. Nice of him to write. Please thank him. There isn't a lot of opportunity for letters, though I expect he would make them if he were in my place. I wish I could tell you any news of interest, but I canna.

*August 7.*

No letters for two days but I know that is not your fault.

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It's still the hot windy weather that takes all the skin off you by day and is rather icy at night. I taught the baynit this morning and threw some Boche bombs this afternoon, and then had a swim in the river. I really think I should not be bad with the baynit (which we call the sword) if only I had not a slight rheumatic in the left shoulder which will not quite go away. Advancing years? or sitting in the mud and snow at Hooge?

This is rather a picturesque spot: I wish I could tell you about it, but I may not. It's rather stupid.

I must say Good-night now.

*August 9.*

No time to write to you to-day, but am very fit. I got three letters from you yesterday. Will try to write more to-morrow.

*Thursday, August 10.*

You would be amused by the place in which I write this—a small scoop in the side of a trench, like a rabbit burrow, to which I've retired after a somewhat disturbed night in the bottom of a trench—disturbed only by rain at 4 a.m. after which I wandered about till breakfast time, getting

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damp and fearing greatly that the fine weather has gone for good. The night before I was in yet another place—resembling a hare's form more than anything else. I made it myself out of an old shell-hole with a hurdle on the top, covered with wild mustard and old sandbags to keep out the dew. Bitly cold it was, too, as nowadays I carry all my goods on my back in my haversack —plus the Aquascutum strapped to it. Not even a pack. I think I am about as Red Injun in colour as I ever have been, including the knees.

No. 12 platoon is not in luck at the moment. I told you about Sgt. — : next day a corporal recently appointed was taken ill and sent down ; and yesterday, while I was instructing the platoon in the bayonet, a fat shell pitched about 30 yards away, and knocked out Sgt. D., breaking his leg below the knee. It was luck having only one man hit—a little nearer and the whole platoon might have been; but, of course, he is a great loss—the only really good N.C.O. I had left. The doctor thinks he won't lose it. He shed his gore all over my only pair of bags as I was helping to carry him in, and there's no water to wash them in. Sich is life at the moment.

Later in the day I had an endless walk with C. through a trench—three hours we took—eating dust all the way, through awful smells and every form of abandonment, from rifles and tin hats to dead men. Oh dear, I don't like war.

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The flies are disgusting and the mosquito netting is very useful.

I'm afraid I envied Sgt. D.

No more at present, and don't picture that we're having a bad time—we're not—so far it's only rather disgusting.

I think it must be Friday, the 11th of August, and I am lying in my scoop again at 3.30 p.m., whence I move very shortly. My schedule for this afternoon was lunch at 1; write to you 1.45-2.15; bath at 2.15; sleep 2.30-4; tea at 4, start at not much later. As usual, things cropped up and have done me in. The postman arrived and departed about 1.45! Buxton has gone up; Brown has gone sick; and messengers have been arriving with messages, effectually preventing me from sleeping at all, and it's now nearly tea-time. On the other hand, it's a fine day again: I have had a magnificent hot bath in half a small tin of water; and your letter has arrived. Also one from Frdk., enclosing Vaughan's. I'm afraid we've missed for sure this time: having just reversed our locations, and I've been seeing the things he has and vice versa. I had a most tussome working party last night: was given a guide and a map reference; didn't trust the guide going up, and took my own way to the map reference. On arriving found that though I'd got to the right place, sure

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enough, the reference had been given me wrong ! Meant another two hours' work for everybody. Got into a shelling and had three men hit (all very slight, I'm glad to say) and one with a sprained ankle, from dodging shells. Allowed the guide to guide me back, with the inevitable result that he lost himself and us; then struck across country and very luckily exactly hit our trench. But not enough sleep quite. Still, it's a beautiful day.

I'm glad you like t'other poems.

*August 12.* Must send this off—no time to write more. We are working despritly hard—very little sleep. I'm afraid letters are likely to be very irregular at present. Don't be worried by that.

*August 14.*

I dare say Eric is quite near, but one simply hasn't time to find out, and we might be only 100 yds. away without knowing it. We are having a fairly peaceful two days after two fairly hot ones. I got about three hours' sleep in forty-eight—constant shelling—fearful smells and working like navvies. Did about double the ordinary infantry-man allowance myself. The flies are disgusting now. I think the platoon is getting rather friendly at last—had about half a dozen of them chatting to me during the shells, when they most want a little consolation. My Buff friend, Shafto, was

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

killed, I think the night after I had the carrying party, in much the same place. Quite the best man in the Batt., I should say. We got off very lightly.

I can't distinguish sunburn from dirt on my face now. If I rub too hard the skin comes off; and if I don't, the dirt remains on ! Vaughan's letter very amusing. I hope Frdk. is really better. Brown is back again, fairly fit, I think.

I am in my rabbit scoop again. My last bed was a ledge of chalk about 1 ft. wide and 4 long, at an angle sideways—not very comfortable ! Oh dear, there comes the Q.M.S. for the letters. I must finish.

*August 16.*

No letters for two, three days, so a little flatness. But I hope soon I shall get three or four to make up. The weather has turned misty moisty, which is rather a nuisance when one sleeps without any bed-clothes. I tie things like a sock or a towel round my knees and get my legs into a damp sandbag to keep warm; and really was quite warm last-night.

Quite a slack day yesterday and might have for some days. You remember Vaughan's position in the Push? Probably mine would be the same if there were one at any time.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

Did I tell you of a rather nice boy in my platoon who writes a family letter daily always beginning—

'Dear Mum and Dad, and dear loving sisters Rosie, Letty, and our Gladys,—I am very pleased to write you another welcome letter as this leaves me. Dear Mum and Dad and loving sisters, I hope you keeps the home fires burning. Not arf. The boys are in the pink. Not arf. Dear loving sisters Rosie, Letty, and our Gladys, keep merry and bright. Not arf.'<sup>1</sup>

It goes on like that for three pages—absolutely fixed; and if he has to say anything definite, like acknowledging a parcel, he has to put in a separate letter—not to interfere with the sacred order of things. He is quite young and very nice, quiet, never grousing or gives any trouble—one of those very gentle creatures that the War has caught up and tried to turn into a frightful soldier, I should think in vain. I can't imagine him sticking anybody, but I'm sure he would do anything he felt to be his duty. —'s servant is also another of the gallant lambs. He is a squat little elderly man of about 45—was a comedian of sorts, and looks it—has a wife and five children—was rejected six times by the doctors and got in as a bandsman; then shoved out here into the front line. He sings comic songs and cheers the others and waddles about manfully, but is no more a fighting ruffian

<sup>1</sup> The names in this letter have been changed—my husband had a great regard for the writer. He expresses it here and did later in conversation with me. C. H. V.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

than a child of six. Yet he too takes part in the bloodiest battles of the world.

A. B. really is a pleasing and exasperating person. He'll wander in at 11.30 a.m. and ask if lunch is ready. I say 'No, it's only 11.30. Would you like it earlier than usual?' He says 'Yes, I should rather—I'm rather hungry.' So I get the cook to promise it at 12.30 instead of 1, and at about 12.25 B. will stray forth and return about 2.15, and be quite hurt because the lunch is rather cold! But I enjoy it.

*August 17.*

I did get four letters to-day.

I got into a nasty bombardment last night with a party I had volunteered for—80 men and only one hit, which was very lucky, as we had to sprint across the open under shrapnel, besides two hours heavy stuff. All quite unnecessary and somebody's fault, but I don't know quite whose and probably never shall. These things will happen at times. The Regimental Sgt.-Major was with me: a terrific person with a wonderful waxed moustache, and it was very funny to see him peering out of various holes in the ground like a coney. He told me he cracked several jokes with some of the young fellows to keep their spirits up; but I can't say that I heard him, and as Brown remarked, that

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

would have been much more awful to them than the actual bombardment. His idea of a joke would be to say—'Here! You! Put yer cap on straight!'

*August 18.*

I forgot to answer your question about the small dog in the photograph. It doesn't belong —was only a farm creature of one of the mixed French types, introduced as a mascot. The troops like a mascot—in fact, I believe that is why the very young officer is better than the older ones. They like some young frolicsome creature like — barking at their heels and playing about in their midst. There are two or three lurcher creatures kept at the Transport, but they don't go into the front line much. One big puppy doesn't seem to mind shells a bit.

I am afraid I am in for a Lewis gun course. I suppose other people would like it, so, pig-headedly, I don't. The thing is a machine, and, anyway, like Howard, I don't like leaving the platoon in these strenuous times. The course is, I believe, a week, far from the firing line. At present I am at the Transport on my way, as it were: might be recalled, but don't think it's likely. I asked to be left with the platoon and can't do more.

I don't see any Paris or other leave in prospect

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

for a long time, confound the Boches. I wish I did. I do wish they hadn't done away with leave. The thing seems never-ending without a prospect of it.

Give my love to all and a pat to Meriel and the Bul Hound.<sup>1</sup>

*August 23.*

I am very fit and well, but I'm afraid you've been left without a letter for five days and I only hope you haven't been worried by it. I might have sent you a Field post card, but the fact is that I thought that might make you worry rather more, and I hoped that, as my last letter told you I was going on a course, you would at all events think I was in some safe spot instead of the very unsafe one where I was.

Directly after I finished that letter to you I was wired for to reinforce the Batt. in an attack. When I wrote to you that I should be in Vaughan's position if anything happened, I knew something was going to happen shortly. I had proposed to Buxton that I should go up with the platoon instead of V., and that had been arranged; but at the last moment the C.O. insisted that V. should go, as an old and regular soldier. C. was necessary as Lewis gun officer, and the choice lay between

<sup>1</sup> The bull mastiff appearing in the frontispiece.

# LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

June 9.

These will somehow have to be a scrap, as we have been working all the morning instead of last night, which was very wet. Two padres just come into the dug-out and the jabber is incessant.

June 10.

Cloudy—a mild showery April one. Got up today at 3 a.m. to the sound of distant firing, and am not as vigilant as I ought to be when ~~when~~ ~~it~~ ~~is~~ ~~you~~. We had a fairly exciting day yesterday. Some aggravating gunners, two of them ~~two~~ ~~one~~, who ought to have known better, came into the trench unknown to us and began observing us from the parapet by day—a thing we have been at the utmost pains to prevent our men doing for days past. Just as we found them there, ~~they~~ ~~were~~ ~~happily~~ about with field-glasses and things, the French spotted them too, and opened with ~~with~~ ~~explosives~~ and H.E. Quite hot for half an hour, but evidently hit luckily, though the trench was buried in in parts—the annoying thing is that they have now marked it down as a suitable target. In the evening I had a man hit by a machine-gun and had to roll rapidly down a steep bank in the dark to avoid it myself. Still, it's a very nice change from the last place, especially when one

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

thinks of what is going on there now—of which we only get the light in the sky and the heavy boom of the guns.

June 12.

The weather has turned to a horrible wet cold slop and it's more like November than June.

One sees a few roses in shelled gardens climbing among shattered bricks, and the wild flowers are rather numerous in the parts where nobody dare go to cut the hay, and it's too dangerous to pasture animals. Yes, Sgt. A. has got the M.C., and also Sgt. W., and some of the others may get it for Hooge yet.

The naval news seems to grow better daily.

I think Howard<sup>1</sup> is justified in his grouse, but, of course, it is even more so in the Regular Batt. and the plums are very strictly preserved. I think before the war ends, the system will have to be altered, or we shall find ourselves working on the odd and probably disastrous view that three months at Sandhurst is more valuable than two years at the Front. However, we generally do end by surrendering our cherished stupidities before it is too late.

<sup>1</sup> Sub-Lieut. Howard Fry, Howe Batt., Royal Naval Division, killed in action, November 16, 1916, my brother.—C. H. V.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

Brown and me. Brown was taken because owing to the bayonet course I had missed some attack practices he had had. V. and Brown are both dead now, shot through the heart. You will see the account of the Push in *Times* of 21st. I went to the Transport with four others when the Batt. went up, stayed a night there, and wrote to you on the 18th. The attack came off at 2.30 p.m., and at 3.30 the five of us were sent for to Brigade H.Q. No time to pack anything, a blazing hot day, and I had to borrow the Quartermaster's revolver as I'd lent mine to V. An hour-and-a-half's walk to Brigade H.Q., where we heard that things were going very well, but more officers were needed. I sent Ginger back from there, as he seemed too small to stick Boches.

From there we had a three hour walk to the front line. Shells most of the way, and the wounded streaming down an open road between the downs. We passed A. D., hit through the leg, but filled with delight because he was going back to Blighty alive and kicking: then —, rather badly hit in the shoulder—heaps of bandaged men, including two of my platoon. The men of all regiments, and wounded in every variety of way. To read in the papers you might suppose the wounded were whisked from the battlefield in a motor ambulance. I get rather tired of all that false and breezy representation of a battle.

I've never been so hot in my life as when we

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

came to Batt. H.Q., just behind our jumping-off trench. There we heard of Brown and V. and many others, and from there we went on to join our Coys. in the various bits of Boche trench they had taken. No guide, a hail of shells and a sort of blind stumble through shell-holes to where we fancied the new line was. I found C Coy. at last. H.Q. in a 30 ft. deep Boche dug-out, choked with dead Germans and bluebottles, and there we had our meals till we started back at 4 a.m. this morning (five days). In between that time I certainly spent some of the most unpleasant hours of my life. It seems that the Batt. had done extraordinarily well and gained the first of two objectives. The second was to be won that night. and next day we were to be relieved. Unfortunately a Batt. on our right had been held up and we had to wait for them in a trench choked with our dead and Boche wounded and dying for two days and then do another attack. The men had been in high spirits over the first part, but naturally the reaction was great when they found that instead of being relieved they were to dig in, and I had never seen them so glum. Here again the breezy reporter is revolting. The Push itself is done in hot blood: but the rest is horrible, digging in when you are tired to death, short rations, no water to speak of, hardly any sleep, and men being killed by shell-fire most of the time.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

I was given the C line in front of H.Q. to hold with two-and-a-half platoons, and luckily the Boches never really found it, and I had fewer casualties than anybody. I slept in the bottom of the trench, sometimes in rain (in shorts), without any cover and really never felt very cold. Also, though I don't suppose I got more than an hour at a time, I never felt done for want of sleep. C. and Buxton were the only officers left.

The second attack was made yesterday, and only our D Coy. was sent off at the start. C. was to support it if it needed reinforcement. My dear, you never saw anything more dramatically murderous than the modern attack—a sheet of fire from both sides in which it seems impossible for any one to live. I saw it from my observer's post about 100 yds. away. My observer was shot through the head in the first minute. The O.C. of D Coy. had been badly wounded, and Butler led them on most gallantly. The last I saw of him was after a huge shell had burst just over him (laying out several men) waving on the rest. None of the D officers came back, and very few of the men.

Again the right Batt. failed, and this time the R.B. was inevitably involved in it, as far as D Coy. went. We gained a certain amount of France back by digging a trench in front of my bit of line about 100 yds. from the Boches in the dark, lit by terrific flares from the

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German lines. After that we hunted for our wounded till 4 a.m. I found S. S. about 50 yds. from the Boche trench, shot through the heart. R. got back wounded in several places. Butler was last heard of in a shell-hole about 10 yds. from the Boches. He was an awfully gallant fellow. The whole thing was almost too bloody for words, and this, mind you, was victory of a sort for us. We fancy the Boches lost far more heavily, as our guns got on them when they were reinforcing.

I'm too sleepy to tell you any more. The Batt. did magnificently : captured many prisoners and advanced several hundred yards ; but the cost is very great.

Now we are out of it for days at any rate.

*August 24.*

I was so sleepy last night when I finished my letter that I don't know what I told you and what I didn't, and I'm sleepier than ever now. I'll try and write a decent letter to-morrow. I got two of your letters in the middle of the strafe.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*August 25.*

I hadn't time after all to-day to write. We have been moving behind the lines, where we shall be for over a week, I fancy.

Your cake arrived, and one Lieut. remarked it was the best he had tasted since he had come out, and several others said the same.

*August 26.*

It's one thing to promise a letter and another to get it done, for when the fighting is done, it's not, as the newspapers make out, a rest cure, but fuss and fury and discomfort and hard work.

I don't think I told you the most miraculous part of the affray the other day. One of the D Coy. wounded, dragging himself back to the line I held, heard a shell coming and dropped into what he thought was the nearest shell-hole, but was, in fact, a well 60 ft. deep. Nobody saw him, but a sentry heard him call after a time. The problem then was how to get him out, for the beastly thing had shelving sides made of boulders and old mortar quite loose, so that if you went near it started rolling down and threatened to bury him. We got him up six hours later at about

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3.30 a.m. by means of a pick tied to a wire rope, to which he fastened himself. I was desperately afraid he would fall off half-way up or wouldn't have the strength to tie himself on, but he did. One would have had to go down in that case, but I think he would have been buried from above in the process. At least three men were ready to go after him, though it wouldn't have been a pleasant job for them either. The amazing thing was that he came up—without a bone broken—from a dry well 60 ft. deep.

It's rather melancholy this after the battle business. —'s brother came over to-day to hear about him, also —. You'll see a host of names.

I see the *Times* of 24th says it's the most successful day since the Push started, and apparently the R.B.s are considered to have done awfully well. I spoke a lot of German that night to wounded prisoners.

*August 27.*

I'm still without leisure. Buxton has gone sick for two days at least.

The troops after their push are bivouacked in an open field with no cover but their waterproof sheets—constant showers—not very comfortable for men who have hardly slept and never ceased

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

working under shell-fire for a week. Some old noodle's fault, I suppose.

My dear, some of the men are too quaint. One lad, whose brother was killed the last night in the Boche trench, came to me to ask how to write to his sister-in-law about it. He had got as far as—'My dear Lil,—I now have great pleasure in telling you that Tom——' and there he had stuck. I had to draft a more sympathetic letter for him. The same on being asked if he would like to help bury his brother said, 'I will, if you like, sergeant.' Yet he was quite upset.

The G.O.C. congratulated the Brigade to-day in the rain; it somehow seemed unnecessary.

Funny that E., D., D., and I, who came out together, should be all left—with only about five others.

*August 28.*

It's a fine evening and I sit in a tent with a towel over my knees to prevent the flies, which are appalling, from tickling them, and am for the moment at leisure, so I must freakily try to write to you.

It's one of the errors of the Army that Q.M.S., which is a non-combatant job, is part of the upward gradation, so that you may lose a good fighting man at a critical moment because he's been made Q.M.S., or you may have an intelligent clerk step out of it to be Sgt.-Major.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

They have got up tents for the men and there's a concert now going on just outside mine. They do pick up their spirits most wonderfully.

— has just gone down sick. He was frightened to death in the trenches, yet very brave and cheerful, but saw himself there for days after, and the shells coming. I got C. to swap him for the Padre's servant, who is a fit youth, so that in future — won't have to go into the trenches, which he's too old for. Forty-five !

9.30 p.m. The concert is coming to an end. The padre has got them to sing 'Abide with Me.' It is rather fine—a starry night, the tents all lighted and looking like a lamp-lit city in this niche of the downs. Away to the north one of these murderous battles is raging.

*August 29.*

I fancy we shall go into trenches for a bit before we rest properly, but not, I think, for an attack.

Tremendous thunderstorm to-day, which flooded our tent and the men's.

To-morrow we go for a bathe.

*August 31.*

No letter from you yesterday. We had a thunder-storm yesterday—tropical rain—with the result that all the tents got flooded. Ours being pitched

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on old horse lines, we spent the day on liquid manure, which does not tend to make things any cleaner—or oneself. In the evening we moved to this camp. I rode the Coy. horse till I was stiff with cold, after which I walked. We dined about midnight, and are this morning shifting our tent again.

Buxton still away, but the padre is still with us—*i.e.* C. and self—so are flies and other bougs!

I fear the damp won't make the country or the men any healthier, as it washes the dirt about and probably gets into water supplies. I am afraid we shall have some working parties the next few days, but I ought to have time to write to you.

Please order a new Aquascutum; I have lost my other and don't see a chance of getting one out here.

*September 2.*

A pleasing Blighty one at last, and almost before you get this I shall, with luck, be in Angle-terre with you a-coming to see me. It's shrapnel through the thigh, and hasn't been pronounced on yet by the medical authorities, who have to extract a bit of iron that didn't go quite through. But as I plunked through the trenches knee-deep in mire for six hours afterwards, more or less, it can't be very bad; and I ought to get back before you can think of coming here. I got it in another

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show suddenly forced upon us, in which I was in charge of the Coy., with C. only subaltern. A shell plumped neatly between six of us, killed Sgt. Oliver and hit the rest in divers ways. It was rather a funny sensation. I thought I'd been bruised. Handed over to C., who a little later got badly hit in the arm. So C Coy., when I last heard of it, is without officers—three platoon sergeants knocked out—two killed—both awfully nice fellows, and A. rather badly hit.

Haven't had a meal since lunch yesterday, and now it's lunch to-day; advanced to the attack in the full height of an attack of sickness and a temperature up. All the troops are that, but I never expected to be. It was very awkward.

Will let you know as quick as quick.

A Chaplain is addressing this.<sup>1</sup>

[*September 7.* Telegram from Robert from Southampton saying he was on his way to Oxford—where he arrived at Somerville Hospital about 6 p.m.]

*December 29.*

[Robert left Waterloo at 11.55 a.m. for Southampton, crossed that night and reached Havre next day.]

<sup>1</sup> The envelope was addressed and signed 'L. Maclean Watt, C.F.' If these lines should ever come to his notice, I here offer him my thanks.—C. H. V.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

INFANTRY BASE DEPOT, *Sunday, December 31, 1916.*  
HAVRE.

As you will see from the above I am posted to another Batt., which means only that that is the one I go to when I go into the line. In the meanwhile I am here in quite a pretty place among a pack of lads whom I don't know from Adam for the most part. We had the usual quaintness in crossing; arrived at Southampton, where the M.L.O. took about forty times as long over his job as was necessary. We were then despatched in the rain to a dirty boat (good enough to breed rabbits in) and then told we had just an hour to go into the town and get a meal. When we got back within the hour, we found that the boat was not starting, so all the valises had to be carted to another boat, about a half a mile away, and we got off at 9 o'clock. Crowds of people, some of whom slept in the gangway. I luckily secured a cabin (without berths or door—both had been taken down for some unknown reason) and offered half to a pleasant doctor-captain. An under-steward offered to rent me his own cabin for the night for the small sum of 25s., which I refused, and should like to have the authority to shoot him.

Am quite a believer in Mothersill, as I took two doses and never felt a qualm, though it was rough and many people ill. Breakfast on the boat half-a-crown. Profit about 200 per cent.—why? Went

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off at Havre with the two lads—who insisted on breakfasting at an officer's club that one of them had visited before when taking out a draft—in preference to a French Hotel! After which we came here by train. Brilliant criticisms of the French nation on the way by the one lad who has spent one day in France. Am in a hut with a man named Barrett—brother of Roper Barrett and up at St. John's with Howard. Didn't we meet him in Dorsetshire once?

Have a quite excellent temporary servant.

*January 1, 1917.*

My kit arrived and I slept in the Jigger (Jaeger) blanket and it was very pleasant.

Marched up in the rain this morning and then down again at the terrible hour of 8 a.m. (breakfast at 7.30) which does not suit me. But the idea of making things uncomfortable for the inferior people seems very dear to the heart of those who do not take part in the discomforts. However, it doesn't make much odds for a few days—after which, of course, discomforts become necessities, and for that reason much more tolerable. I don't expect to be here for very long. Am by months the senior subaltern.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*January 2.*

It has been drizzling steadily for most of two days. Yesterday I went a walk with Barrett and a pleasant Rugby boy. Had *café* at a dirty little *estaminet* with some French soldiers in it. I am going to be inoculated to-day or to-morrow and shall take a day or two off doing nothing, though I don't suppose it will affect me any more than last time.

Food desperately bad on the whole but nobody to worry about it.

*January 3.*

Have just been inoculated. The doctor, a Canadian, told me that he found men between 35 and 40 couldn't stick the trenches! Am just beginning to get a little stiff from the bougs, but have forty-eight hours off.

Met a pleasant man; he has been in Canada a good deal, and says that when he was very ill he read *Mr Faviel* and it made him delirious for three nights. I don't know if this is a compliment or not.

So far I might just as well have been on leave in England, as I have not done one single thing. It continues to drizzle.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*January 4*

This is so far the second day of inoculation and I've had no sensations but a slight stiffness of the chest, so I don't think I'm likely to be any the worse for it. As it has been raining steadily for three days I am rather glad to be off all parades and setting in a hut ante-room which, while the bulk of the youths is away, is quite peaceful.

The only annoyance is that I might just as well have had another week with you.

One doesn't feel much nearer the trenches than before, and it's mostly as unreal as at Minster.

I pass the time reading novelettes abandoned by the other officers and chatting and occasionally playing Bridge for money ! Have lost 70 centimes, so far—there's extravagance !

2 p.m. Just before lunch Howard Elliott<sup>1</sup> and two other gunners walked into our mess by mistake, having just arrived from England. I gave them drinks and gathered you were well. Their mess is almost next door, so I may see him again if we are both here for a few days.

*January 5.*

I am afraid that after this there will be a small gap in the letters, as I start for the Line to-night.

<sup>1</sup> Lieut. Howard Elliott, R.F.A., a cousin.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

I have made two voyages to Havre—one yesterday afternoon with B. to see the sea front, which is really rather fine, and one this morning with Barrett and Scoville to have a very good hot bath and *déjeuner*. I believe it takes at least forty-eight hours to get up. Luckily it has turned dry, if colder, and the roads have become roads again instead of mud soup. Howard Elliott has just been in to announce that he is going by the same train—so we may travel as far as Rouen together.

I think our selection of goods for the Front was excellent, and I can't think of anything I want beyond.

*Sunday, January 7.*

Having started on Friday have arrived at our back lines without a cold, which is rather good. The Batt. is in the *tranchées*, but comes out shortly: as a result we have not met any of the important officers as yet. I am very near where I was last time and glad of it, as here the spring should come earliest. I might even come across your *Téléphoniste français*. Shan't be in the trenches for some days.

The scene of writing is an enormous and cold hut containing about thirty officers—outside, a sea of mud.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*January 9.*

There isn't much news. Have spent two days almost entirely in a large hut about four times the size of our long barn—without windows—and one brazier to warm it. We really are too stupid at making ourselves as comfortable as circumstances permit. This is an out-of-the-trenches camp and should be really comfortable, but no. Outside a sea of mud as far as the eye can see—not so deep, perhaps, as the Flanders mud, but less diversified by buildings or hop poles. A Service Batt. has much less grand notions of comfort even than a Regular one; and personally I should have sacked the staff long ago. The food—wug!

The officers have just turned up—some quite pleasant, I think, the remainder very young and temporary, but all very friendly. The Adjutant is a trifle junior to me, I think, in the Army, and probably about 20. Haven't seen the C.O. yet. Haven't got a Coy. yet or a servant.

The weather is not very chic—bitly wind and rain. I almost think it would be well to send out my old tunic—the one I was hit in.

*January 11.*

The Jaeger blanket is very nice and I don't know what I should do without it, as it is bitly

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

cold. Had a bayonet practice yesterday and a ride on a most charming small horse, who kept bolting for about twelve miles. It is unfortunately the A horse, not B.

I can't quite see the Service Batt. in comparison with the Regular. They haven't nearly as good an idea of making themselves comfortable, feed and live like pigs, and don't get any work out of the servants. Same with N.C.O.s, I should fancy, but that remains to be seen.

*January 12.*

Am renewing my acquaintance with dug-outs, and such just as bad as ever—and the mud as deep as I've seen it. I like the Coy. officers, what I've seen of them, and think I am probably lucky in that respect. I doubt if any of them have been out as long as I have; but that's the way it goes. The Coys. are occupied now: a couple of months ago nobody to command them, so I get left again. I don't really mind.

*January 15.*

Just a line to say very fit. Post just going. Will write more to-night—probably.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*January 16.*

Can't write very much now. Have a rather beastje sore throat, but otherwise very fit, and the throat is not to be wondered at, for conditions of damp, dirt, and absence of fuel are a good deal worse than any I have seen. Like the people of the Coy. very well, and the Front seems very fairly cushy—and if only the warm weather would come things would be much improved.

*January 17.*

My throat is so sore that I cannot eat or smoke; and you know the complete misery that is bound to ensue and how it prevents long or nice letters being written. I dare say it will be better to-morrow—if not, I shall have to find a M.O. to give me some cough lozenges. I lay all packed in my valise yesterday, but took a short walk this morning for a change, in about a foot of snow. Not very good for the trenches when it melts. A parcel from Frdk. and May—very fine raisins and short-bread and mints: he must be stopped.

It's very nice of Milliken<sup>1</sup> to want me on the Staff, but no one else does. I think the point is that as long as one can, one can't arrange a cushy job for oneself, though if one offered it's rather different.

<sup>1</sup> Lieut. H. E. Milliken, King's Royal Rifle Corps, a friend of Sheppey days.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*January 18.*

Back in the large damp hut, still with rather a sore throat, but otherwise going fairly strong. I don't think I should have got this but that the O.C. of the Coy. is one of those sort of people who don't seem to mind if they have warmth or not. The consequence is that the first two days and nights we sat in a dripping dug-out without a fire, while four boxes of matches went sodden in my pockets and the servants enjoyed two braziers. Then in an excess of energy he insisted on cutting up wet wood for us, so that asphyxiation came very nigh. But he is quite a nice fellow.

There has been heavy snow and I'm afraid a lot of men will be done in by the weather. The fuel allowance should be trebled and it seems instead to be halved. I should say that for discomfort this part of the Front takes the cake, from what I've seen, nor does a Service Batt. know how to look after itself so well as a Regular. Many of the things we do and don't do would make the hair of the 3rd Batt. stand on end.

Tell Frdk. I will write sometime, but find it very difficult here.

*January 19.*

I am so sorry that letter took so long, but I think they are more erratic from here. To-day,

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

for instance, I received three of yours, after getting none. I'm in my valise reading and writing this—still with my throat very sore and my voice practically gone. A valise is the only place, because out of bed it's impossible to keep warm in this barn, with snow on the ground and freezing going on; but valises are not good for writing in and I hope you don't find my letters too dull for words. The fact is, the light and the cold suppress me rather more than usual : it is too cold to sharpen a pencil properly. I haven't meant to grouse, but what with being too sore to smoke and so forth, you know that I wouldn't be at my friskiest. I am eating the crème de menthes you sent me, which are very good and soothing.

*January 21.*

I put the 19th on my last, but I think it must have been nearer 21st ! Anyway to-day, which is the next day, is Sunday. My throat is getting better. It is freezing away. The Jigger blanket is just invaluable, and I wear Aunt Fanny's scarf round my head, and between them I manage to keep warm. Sorry — won't publish my poem 'To F. G. S.' Their letter is absurd. A poem is a poem and they don't get one once in six months—still there you are.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*Tuesday 23*

Just a line to say going very well. No letters from you for two days, but the first parcel of tabac.

*January 24.*

I am much annoyed because I only wrote you a postcard yesterday and that hasn't been posted. I have been left behind in the damp hut with my sore throat, which the M.O. refers to as laryngitis. It's getting better all the time now, and I get out of the Front line with it, which is not so bad in this awful cold weather. Last night was probably the coldest since the war started—20 deg. of frost, I should think, and a bitly wind blowing, and to-night promises to be as cold. Very miserable for the men, but I believe when they come out we have a long rest behind somewhere. I slip in and out of my valise for meals! It's much warmer in it than anywhere else—with my two waistcoats (your Jaeger one and the new deerskin one that Lily gave me) on, and my fur lining and my trench coat and my blanket on top, and Aunt Fanny's scarf and Frdk.'s Balaclava helmet on my head. One youth here, quite a pleasing cross between an eel and a monkey; very young, but might be 40—so blasé, and wins contentedly at poker. What a race we are rearing and killing.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

I think my servant is a very decent sort of youth, and he certainly has been most attentive.

*January 26.*

Still the hut, but I rather fancy we go out tomorrow and that I shall go ahead and get the billets; I shan't be sorry to be out of this as I have sniffled and coughed here for the best part of ten days, I think. Still freezing hard—icicles poking through the cracks in the hut, and a fearful number of men with trench feet. I am really very much better—can speak now—which is a nice change for so great a conversationalist.

But it does all seem to show that we are still more fit for war than for peace, though one had begun to think the opposite.

The posts are most erratic—again for 3-4 days I haven't had a letter. The snow may be holding things up, though it barely more than covers the ground in these parts, and really yesterday and to-day were beautifully sunny and nice enough for a walk—only I found the sharp air tickles me up too much. However, if we are in billets for a fortnight, I ought to find my feet.

Just got three letters from you and a parcel from my mother, cakes and socks. They are most

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

opportune, as sure as I say I don't want anything, it comes in handy.

It is no good wondering why people get things. They apply mostly, I suppose! One could get them, but that isn't the idea. I don't mind saying I would rather have avoided this winter, but it's getting on now.

*January 28.*

Am in a rest village and have just had two letters from you and a card from your *téléphoniste* saying he shall be delighted to meet me if that is possible. I don't know if it is, but will try to find out where the French are and ride over to see him if there is a chance. I billeted yesterday, bicycling the six miles here with five Q.M.S.s—taking over the accommodation offered, which is pretty bad. The Town Major is, I suppose, responsible, but the village is very poor and anything is good enough for the Infantry. For the Coy. Messes there were three possible ones and one impossible, which accordingly I had not the face not to take for B Coy. It is a sort of cross between a small cellar and a garden room—stone floor with four wire beds—so called—in it; no stove and the wind whistling through the walls. When we introduced a brazier, the old man and woman who live in the rest of the house—two quite comfortable rooms—one of which I tried in vain to

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

get them to lend us for a price just to sit in—dashed in and protested that the ceiling would be blackened! As though the ceiling in a place like our apple room mattered. They would prefer us to sit without any fire in this weather. Naturally I put my foot down. I think those sort of trivial prejudices—trivial at any time—should be entirely disregarded, whether they make for ententes or not, in time of war. And this is the sort of place where one is supposed to recuperate from the trenches. All part of a bad organisation. The civilians could quite easily be turned out, and should be.

I'm really getting on though, and you mustn't mind if I grumped a bit: You know I always do when I am not at my fittest. As I say, I've escaped the trenches by having a sore throat, and after all, that's something.

I stayed in bed to-day (as being the warmest place) till 4 p.m. when I arose and went to the baths, not having had one for a month, in fact, since I left Havre. That would have amused you—simply a hut with boards to stand on and showers overhead—a howling draught—a Tommies' bath-house after hours. Officers don't seem to count on this Front! I found the bath corporal in a sort of stoke-hole by a brazier with his mates, and in the stoke-hole I undressed and walked about 10 yds. to the nearest shower. They had no clean towels but leant me two black ones—

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

one permanently black from stains—and there-with I cleaned myself and hustled back at the double, and feel better for it, though, I dare say, no cleaner.

At the moment we have a brazier in our cellar, but the smoke is so thick that we have to open the door wide every three minutes to escape being suffocated. There, I am making the very worst of things and they aren't really so bad.

My servant is excellent, and in time, I think, things will march better. There's no side, which I like.

*January 30.*

I am getting better and better. I went for a ride yesterday on the Coy. mare—a stupid, clumsy creature; lazy too, with enough go to shy at some drums and barge me into a lot of led horses, stampeding about six in front of an old General! I also brought off another feat, viz., bribing a French woman to cook for us while we are here. The others had tried in vain, but I persuaded her; the result was that we started off last night with the best dinner I've had in France in war-time. Tapioca soup, fish, mutton, and compote of vegetables, and a sweet omelette. She is a widow, lost her husband in the war, and has a small girl, and a baby-boy born after the husband was killed.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

They live here in a broken-down hovel, but of course she can cook ten times as well as any rifleman.

I'm having plenty of sleep; generally breakfast in bed: we all do, as it's too cold to get up and eat it without a fire, and altogether am living in great luxury.

*February 1.*

Letters seem to be coming a little more regularly. Also it has snowed again and is on the whole a little warmer, especially as we have taken on a sort of small hall at the French lady's hovel, removed a broken stove and got an open fire going. You mustn't think I'm having any hardships: you might call them discomforts, perhaps, but nothing more than that, and really at present I'm getting fitter daily and eating like a pig.

The Welsh boy is very nice, and I like him better all the time.

About the question you asked—whether we make better dug-outs? As far as this Front is concerned—No! There are none in some places and very poor ones in others, nor have I ever seen a more uncomfortable part of the line—quite apart from the severity of the weather.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*Saturday, February 3.*

I think last night was about the coldest we've had, but apart from the cold there is really nothing much to complain of. It's exactly the sort of weather one had at Zuoz—a little more wind perhaps, but if one were skating or ski-ing, good enough. When one is standing about doing nothing, it is distinctly cool.

Still the rest village and for some days to come.

Don't pass on my grousings too much, or everybody will think me a pig. I'm really feeling better all the time, though sneefs and coughs will not entirely vanish, which isn't to be wondered at seeing that we sit over a bonfire and freeze alternately. The cooking here goes very well. Madame reminds me very much of Elise in appearance, but is very mournful-looking. The small girl rather taking and always beaming.

*Sunday, February 4 or 5.*

I wrote yesterday and there's no news, but I just send a line. Madame has now offered us her inner apartment with a real stove in it, so that we now have the best mess in the place. I suppose we made a good impression on her.

The Guiachum lozenges have arrived; please thank my mother for them. I have passed on

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

some to my servant, who, with half the Batt., has also a sore throat.

*February 7.*

Just a line to say that we have moved to another place, where I took over the billets from a fatuous Town Major full of muddles. The descent from Madame's cooking to our Rifleman is considerable. The cold is considerable, with a cutting wind such as we had in Finland. But I am better all the time and found my name had been put down for a cushy job behind the lines—consisting of staying behind and paying out money to the Division—apparently on the strength of my having had a sore throat. Not feeling inclined to do the job, I went to the man at present commanding and asked him to select somebody else, which he has done. I don't fancy he knew that I had been out before or knows now. Sich is life in the Army.

I have taken to wearing my pony-skin gloves all day and shall soon be as addicted to gloves as any one, I fear. But the cold is sich that you can't feel your hands without.

My throat is much better. One of the officers of another Coy. I found to-day quite speechless and evidently with bad influenza, shifting camp like anybody else instead of being sent to hospital. And it really is most bitter weather.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

We have just heard the likelihood of the States coming in. I hope they will, if only that one will be able to treat them as human beings after the war, instead of as shirkers.

February 7 (9?).

We have rather a comfortable hut here, luckily, as the wind is tearing cold. I don't know when I've known it more bitly. We are where I told you and nowhere else, in spite of what somebody may have heard to the contrary. I don't think I shall be able to get to your *télephoniste* for some time : can't find out where he is yet, but you never know when you may strike any one. This is rather a quaint Battalion. I haven't seen a man in the Coy. yet, except by accident. They're mostly away on fatigues somewhere else, and one might arrive in the trenches without having known any of them. Not good. I can't make out who is responsible.

I'm very fit in spite of the cold : one's blankets get all dripping wet at night where one's breath freezes and melts again. A parcel from Frdk. last night. Please thank him when you write. Haven't washed to-day so far—3 p.m.—owing to water being frozen up and unobtainable. We have been very lucky to be out during this weather, as one can get gradually acclimatised to it and it can't last indefinitely anyhow.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

Oh, *Vanity Fair* came in Frdk.'s parcel—from Mrs Jenkinson. Very kind of her.

*February 10.*

Just going up. Very fitly. Two parcels arrived most opportunely—the Richoux sweets from you and a parcel from my mother. The sweets already finished and much appreciated. Last night was, I think, the coldest I've ever felt—in a small hut without a door and the wind raging through. The water left in a glass froze solid inside. I think I ought to be some use, as I don't think, comparatively, they know very much about holding a line.

*February 12.*

Out again, but have slept so long that I've only time to send a line. Am very fit. It was most bitly in the trenches. I think I've never been so cold. No fire, no dug-out, and below zero. But very little shelling.

*February 13.*

It is much milder and I expect next time we shall be up to our knees in mud. It certainly was most bitly cold; the men dug out lumps of ice to fill their canteens with, and in the early morning

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

the frost settled all over me. I think the men seem cheery in spite of not being smart, which is perhaps the best thing.

There are tons of things I want to tell you but I can't at the moment think of them.

*February 14.*

Just a line before going up. There's no news. It still freezes fairly hard by night, and thaws rather by day. Except for the wind it wouldn't be bad—far better than mud. Didn't have a letter to-day, but they still arrive in twos or threes mostly.

*February 19.*

I am afraid there will be a gap between my last letter and this, but the fact is that we don't seem able to send back letters from the trenches, or at any rate don't have it done. Out now, after a fairly peaceful time, though we were lucky too, I think. The cold first, and then mud later, when it thawed, were pretty bad—not so much for us, who had a dug-out (Boche) to retire to, as for the men who hadn't.

I found that two hours standing about over the ankles in icy water in ordinary boots froze me up, but was nothing like so cold as last time, when we spent all the time in the open trench. The Boche is very sensible in that way. The whole

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

front, however, is extraordinarily desolate in this weather: pock-marked with frozen shell-holes, every kind of abandoned material lying about, and bodies in ghastly attitudes, just as they fell and were constricted to the ground by the frost immovably until the winter chooses to give up its dead. I think if everybody could see these scenes, the general horror would somehow find the way out, which ordinary morals and intelligence don't seem to. The time the men have while they live is bad enough; it's pathetically absurd to see them plunging about in the mire, laden to the teeth, falling into shell-holes in the dark, getting stuck fast, cursing and patient, and half of them ill enough to be in bed or hospital in peace-time. I pulled one little man ahead of me eight times out of mud holes into which he had fallen in the course of about 200 yards, as we came out.

Am at the moment in a little sausage-shaped iron hut with room for two, but four of us in it.

Rather amusing this afternoon—a greatcoat inspection ordered. B Coy., as a whole, has mud still wet plastered on up to the arm-pits, but no doubt some Brigadier was made happy by knowing that an inspection had been held.

*February 21.*

No news. Out for some time and quite mild weather, which is very nice for a change.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

The gingerbread and all the other things have arrived; and the gingerbread is very good and much appreciated and opportune. And the pipe is very good. The towel came into instant use as a pocket-handkerchief.

— has got a temperature; — has bad malaria, and — a sprained ankle. So that we may be described as a crocky lot on the whole. We are in our most comfortable camp, however, and doing well.

*February 26.*

Arrived back in camp in the early hours of this morning to find five letters from you and one from my mother. But I am so sleepy still that I can hardly keep my eyes open. I was given charge of D Coy. about an hour before we went (its captain being on leave) and was given quite one of the least pleasant parts of the line I have seen. Luckily, we only had two men wounded, though the shelling was incessant and the noise considerable, and, worst of all, the shortage of water such that on the last day we had nothing at all to drink from breakfast onwards. It doesn't suit me to be a camel, as you know, and I was fairly tired when I got in, largely from want of drink, though the mud was terrible and many men arrived in the trench without anything on their feet at all! I will try to describe

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

it later, when I'm less sleepy, but some of the things you would like to know are just what I mustn't tell you.

About morphia. The M.O.s out here vary according to their experience, and I've heard one imploring officers to carry morphia. In many cases it isn't to save life but to alleviate agony for those who must die. Look at the case of the man Shafto got the M.C. for going to give some to—blown out of the trenches on to the barbed wire, quite immovable and dying in great pain, and in any part you may see twenty such. This ground is strewn with the dead who might have been eased a little earlier. I quite admit that it's probably a very dangerous doing, but it's worth taking risks on some occasions. It would be best if all officers knew as far as possible when to and when not to give it.

I think I managed the Coy. moderately all right. Of course it's not much fun running somebody else's Coy. temporarily when you know none of them. Found several lads there whom I used to conduct on working parties to Warden Point in May, 1915.

I'm just desperately sleepy.

*February 27.*

When I wrote to you yesterday, I had just received five letters from you. The same evening

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

three more arrived, so that I got eight yesterday.  
Sich are the posts!

I'm ashamed when Billy<sup>1</sup> writes about my refusing cushy jobs like that. You ought not to pass it on. It's not valour at all—mere conceit. If I were offered a good cushy job, I should probably jump at it.

I said I'd tell you about the line.

We were to go up in gum-boots, and the authorities carefully provided a large number of size 5, with the result that nobody could get into them; and before we could get large ones two-and-a-half hours had passed and we had to go up in the pitch dark. I've never seen it pitchier, and the first hour was a long succession of splashes as men fell off into shell-holes full of water. I fell off three times myself, but luckily missed shell-holes. We took six hours to do a two-and-a-half hours' walk; and some of the men arrived some hours later without anything on their feet! The trench impassable, and you can imagine how warm they feel at the end of a day or two sitting or standing in that sort of half-frozen liquid mud. The youths and I had a Boche dug-out—the most uncomfortable one I've seen, and as filthy as filthy, and there was lots of works on and very little water and plenty of shells. However, we managed very well, though I was glad to get out of it all. The O.C. will be back to-day or

<sup>1</sup> Mr L. W. Clarke, an old school friend.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

to-morrow to take over, which I shan't mind, as I don't like having some one else's Coy. A very sad thing happened. An officer just arrived back—had been out before for a long time—went out on patrol from my trench, got back safe to his own, and when some shrapnel came over a little later, fell down dead—untouched. I suppose he must have been very wrought up, or a weak heart, or something of that kind. A very good man too, he was.

Who do you think came into my dug-out at dead of night and chatted for an hour? Hilaire Belloc—not *the* one, but his son, a very taking youth of about 18, most intelligent, in the R.E.s. He'd come up to site a trench and we chatted of G. K. C. and Bentley. He knew Daly—that nice boy who had been killed at Guillemont—and had been trying to find his grave. I was very pleased with him and thought the R.E.s had got hold of somebody good at last!

The D Sgt.-Major, rather a nice old boy—an ex-policeman—fatherly and amiable, but considerably lost in the trenches, I think, and would be happier at an island of Charing Cross.

D Coy. O.C. just returned. You must not worry about gaps between letters. It's unavoidable. The thing that alarmed you [Le Transloy] wasn't far off.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*February 28.*

This is a line-and-a-half letter. I sent you a longish one yesterday and not much has happened since, except that we stood to in the middle of the night for an attack and ate the ginger-cake, which was very good. I don't know that a monthly tooth-brush is required, because it's only very occasionally one has the chance of cleaning one's teeth, and I've still only had one bath since joining the Batt. The fact is that it seems to be the maid-of-all-work to the Brigade, unlike the 3rd, which was upper parlour-maid, so to speak, and they never seem to give us proper rest. The men barely get down from the trenches before they are up again carrying, sore feet or no. They go sick pretty often, but that's no wonder.

— is just going off sick, and we shall be three who a little time ago were eight. Of course, the weather has a lot to do with things. There's a raw cold on again now and much mud, but I seem to keep very fit.

Spurling is a very good fellow. I like him better all the time, and if I haven't got Coys., I've been very lucky with Coy. O.C.s.

*March 1.*

It's the nicest day we've had out here, from the weather point of view, which is something; and will be more if it continues.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

I had a working party last night—a fairly clean night, not bad for carrying in, and very few shells—the only drawback being that there was a mess and we were kept waiting about doing nothing for one-and-a-half hours. Such is life in the Army. I lay in bed till lunch time, and now I haven't a great deal of time to write in. I know my letters ought to be much better and more interesting, but somehow dullness is the thing that oppresses one out here, or at least me, and I haven't the spirit to rise above it.

Have just written to that officer's wife, as it probably rather adds to her grief that he was not among people he knew at all.

*March 5.*

Just come back from a tour in the *tranchées*, and as this may go early to-morrow morning, I am sending you a line and a half just to tell you that I am fit. It snowed pretty heavily last night, and the night before was a sharp frost—about 15 or 20 degrees, I should say, which made us as cold as mud, as we ran out of coke.

Trenches very dull and noisy—not many casualties.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*March 7.*

I feel rather a thneak because I didn't write to you yesterday to make up for the scrabby one of the night before, but the fact is, I had my second bath. You might not think that would prevent it, but as a matter of fact, B. and I, after sleeping till nearly lunch time, set out directly after in search of a bath and didn't get back till dinner and bedtime. We voyaged to the village partly on foot, partly in a motor belonging to an old Roads Capt., and partly by a big lorry—about nine miles. The baths were real baths of aged tin, and the water was as hot as hot, and when we got out we both said, we hope we shall get a lorry back, as we felt remarkably feeble. We did get a lift another way in an Anzac lorry, and also in one driven by a Belgian spy, but had to go out of our way as our road was blocked; and in the end were dropped about six miles from camp. I got better as we went on, but B. got worse—so much so that we had to stop every 100 yards or so to rest him, and I thought I should have to leave him and go and get some whiskey to bring him back. It's an odd result of a bath, but I suppose due to not having had one for a month or more. I certainly felt extraordinarily tottery too, though I think we're both all the better for it to-day, besides being clean once more.

The weather has turned bitter again—a raging

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

wind which is freezing the ground hard. I'm all by my lone in a hut without a fire, the others having gone to the local 'Coliseum' in the hope, as B. says, that the congested humanity there will help to warm them.

We started your cake to-day and it's nearly gone already—very very good.

I might possibly get left out of the trenches next time, as, if possible, we take turns, but so many officers have gone sick or hit that we may be rather short. One youth was shot in the dug-out I was in when I had D Coy.—through the thigh—by a man cleaning his rifle. Rather annoying sort of way to be wounded.

I don't think there is much news of our last tour; the last few hours were horribly cold, and you couldn't move about at all; but Spurling is a very good sort to be with, and an excellent Coy. Commander, my only criticism being that he does too much himself instead of making other people do it. I came down with the Sgt.-Major (who was an old 3rd Batt. man, not that he's more than 28 now, I should think, but served with the 1st during the retreat from Mons and was full of reminiscences. He's very good, I think, and I think the men are very good and cheery too.

*March 8.*

It's gone excessively cold again—a bitter, raging, freezing wind, and I'm very glad we're not in the

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

trenches, and hope you haven't got it, as it won't be very nice in the garden for you. Had a short parade this morning and was glad to flee in and set by a smoky but warm fire.

Nothing suggests itself to be written about, though I dare say there may be plenty. I think it's true, as I've just heard Spurling and B. saying, that you can't settle to a letter when you're cold, and much smoke in your eyes doesn't assist. So you must take the will for the deed.

I believe almost for certain that I shall not be in the trenches next time.

*March 9.*

I would like a letter, not having had one for some days. I'm afraid it's U-boats or something, and will work both ways, and we shall each get bunches when they do come, and the ones you get will be dull bunches. What with having no letters and a jump in my right eye, I feel a little flat; also, it has snowed mostly all day, which is stupid when one had begun to think the spring might be coming. I have been Orderly Officer to-day, which meant doing nothing whatever—which, considering the weather, I didn't mind at all.

Think this must be finished to-morrow, as much smoke is going into my eyes.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*March 10.* I have just been to the local Coliseum —will tell you more to-morrow. No letters yet.

*March 11 (I think).*

Probably send you a long letter to-morrow. Am staying down for a Court-Martial. Have had six letters from you in last twenty-four hours, so am much bucked.

*March 1917.*

I must write you a properly long letter between to-day and to-morrow, and answer some of the questions in the six letters I've just got.

This is started in another hut—a little further down the road, where I am dwelling with two officers of C Coy. The weather is full of heavy showers, but much milder.

There is no leave on—not that I should have any if there was.

You asked if there were any spring flowers here—the only sign of life is some dull gray grass here and there which has come out since the snow melted. It doesn't look, in this pitted country, as though anything like a flower could ever come out.

Sorry Milliken has gone out again. I doubt if he should have. It's rather annoying the differences. A youth who has just come tells me that

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

his colonel at home was going to send nobody out for the second time until all those who had not been out before had gone. Which seems only fair.

The tunic is very good, but I haven't had the courage to get out of my woolly one, especially as the latter goes over both waistcoats—Lily's deerskin and the Jigger one you gave me.

I am sorry about the poem, but it is rather odd, considering the amount of bosh that is printed, that unassuming poetry should not stand a chance even with the self-considered literary papers. However, I seem born to miss the mark.

I enclose letters from Billy and the Medicine Man.<sup>1</sup> I suppose people do want to know what it's like here, but very few who have satisfied that knowledge would want to go on adding to it. Of course those boys who write home that it's the time of their lives may be doing it from sporting motives. I know — always maintains that people at home should not be informed, and he tells his people that he is enjoying himself thoroughly. That is rather nice, but I'm not sure if it really works.

We are no longer three but five. Hence I am staying behind, but I don't know that one is overworked anyhow. You can't do more than a certain amount, and that is perhaps better than doing nothing in this appalling country.

<sup>1</sup> Dr. O. Hilton.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*March 14.*

I'm a little shaky about the date, but I rather fancy it's Wednesday or Thursday, and I'm still resting. The weather is storm-like—heavy down-pours with intervals of sun. We have breakfast in bed, where we shave and wash (?) and get up for lunch—inspect some rifles after it, and then one's duty is o'er for the day, so that I ought to have time to write. The only remaining difficulties are that one's eyes are usually full of smoke. —— talks his head off in a very interesting way, and as one does nothing at all there is not much to write about. However, I did get off a short scrap to my mother yesterday, and might attempt Frdk. and Billy to-day.

*March 18.*

Just got up—11 a.m.—and still in camp, so you see I have been living a life of luxury and ease. Might not have been, because, shortly after your last letter went off, an old magazine exploded in the camp we had been in for days and demolished things. We became aware of it by an awful roar, followed by earth and stones falling in our hut here—half a mile away. The sort of thing that in peace-time would fill the front pages of the newspapers. Crater about four times the size of

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

the one you saw at Eastchurch. Sich are some of the incidents while in rest, though to be sure they are not exactly common. One little bugler I assisted to dig out about a quarter-of-an-hour later, said, as he was unearthed—' Ah'm one of the looky beggars, ah am.' He was the colour of this paper and deadly sick, and couldn't stand. They are plucky, most of these men.

I wish the war were nearer a finish. I suppose it will be if they can squash the submarines.

*March 19.*

Just going up on a very fine day. It's rather contradictitious that —, who likes soldiering, should be made a Colonel in Ireland, isn't it? I think I should make quite a good Irish Colonel.

Getting appointed to Roads jobs, and such, is not usually a compliment. The worst of this war is that the cushy jobs are not the honourable ones, as a rule; though it may be that one cannot stand the trenches. Only a percentage can in this weather.

## FIELD SERVICE POST CARD.

*March 21.*

I am quite well. Letter follows at first opportunity.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*March 22.*

Being forrad, this isn't writing time, but things are rather different at the moment, as you may see in the papers, and for us at present safer than I've ever known them. Also a groom has come hither, and can take back a letter, so I'm writing one at two minutes' notice, and it won't be very long. Bitly cold; I don't think I've been colder than the last three nights; but the snow has knocked the wind down and made it a bit warmer. We are in a ruined house in a ruined village, and in the far sky is the smoke of many burning villages.

*March 24.*

Just a line to say I'm out, very slipsy after sich bitly weather that I was too cold even to sleep! Found pipe and pipe-cleaners just when I wanted it; also a very fine parcel from my mother. Things are so difficult to get out here now that these gifts have become extra valuable.

That was a very nice letter your mother copied for me—she could not wish a better.

Very fit, in spite of the cold, and hoping that the Boches are really getting it somewhere.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*March 25.*

I sent you a snippet last night to say we were out. We had rather an interesting time, and but for the extreme coolth it would have been a nice change.

The newspapers will probably have given you some idea of it, but as usual they are grossly exaggerated and unduly optimistic, though no doubt things are moving forward considerably. We spent some days in a ruined room in a ruined village with snowdrops poking out of the shell-holes in the garden and saw cavalry on the go. Spurling and I also went for what looked like a country walk and got in a spinney rather larger than the one on the way to the Lordship, which the Boches then shelled for half an hour, while we dodged around and around trying to get out. Just as we did, I heard another coming, got under a bank and shouted to him to. He did so just as the shell burst on the road not five yards ahead of him. I never saw a shell so near, and never without doing some damage, but luckily it fell over his head and just in front of him, so that he was behind it, which is, I believe, the best position to be in. The one that hit me at Delville was three times as far away.

It was one of the kind that you can hear go off perhaps six miles away, and then after a minute,

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

just the faintest whirr before it bursts with a terrific crash.

The Germans seem to be behaving abominably; that is in keeping with their traditions apparently, but it makes me feel that they won't realise the war till they have had their own houses deliberately blown up by a number of insulting fiends. Losing colonies or navies doesn't affect the individuals at all closely, and though they mayn't have the guilt of their Government, I think they have to bear the punishment of the crimes they commit to order.

Now I must stop as I am taking the Coy. to get baths and hope to get one myself.

*March 26.*

I've just got a letter from you.

I don't think I should be like —. But, of course, one has to remember that a good many people's nerves do go wrong in the war, and it won't be over for them even when peace is declared. That is one of the penalties of war, I suppose. You cannot go in and kill one another and then say suddenly—'We've had enough'; though, I dare say, for the majority the thing will be nothing but a dull memory.

27. I didn't get this letter off by yesterday's post owing to a beastje early parade combined with too much smoke in the eyes. We are too utterly

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

foolish about these things. The Boches have standardised a small stove with funnel to take the smoke away, and have it in every dug-out (one of their jokes is to leave a bomb in the mouth of the stove-pipe when they retire), whereas we, every time we go to a new camp, just hunt about for some expensive can, knock holes in it, burn wet wood in it, and sit with smoke in our eyes and the oily grease and soot spoiling everything in the place. The cost of the stove and pipe is probably less than the cost of every can we destroy. I think Chowser<sup>1</sup> is right and Picardy has the worst climate in Europe. It has snowed and sludged and sleeted for the last ten days, in spite of which I seem to keep remarkably fit.

I'm afraid I'm an Epicurean thrown among Stoics. It's rather crushing (and, no doubt, a form of Nemesis) when my stomach turns at some horrible dish to find them all smacking their lips over it. I have to be fastidious all by my lone !

You know how they say Tommies always grouse, and dismiss it cheerfully as a peculiarity of the Tommy. Personally, I think they grouse very little at the inevitable things and are as cheerful and patient as possible. What they grouse at is the unnecessary discomforts, and so do I. They can see as plainly as any one that to sit in the cold and wet with fuel all round you is absurd; to get a bath in two months when they might have

<sup>1</sup> Mr Maurice Wilkinson, F.R. Hist. S., a friend from Oxford days.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

one once a week, is somebody's mismanagement. And when they grouse, somebody ought to suffer instead of the matter being lightly dismissed as a humorous trait of the private soldier; or else, after the war, they will grouse in earnest at all the want of organisation for which they were not responsible, but somebody else was. Of course some things are well done, but a lot are not.

Post goes soon, and this is written in bed after breakfast. What luxury.

*March 30.*

I'm writing this in a tent in a camp in the middle of a sea of mud, near a small ruined French town, weather squally—snow or rain—but tent pretty dry. We sleep on very muddy scraps of board : with a Boche stove in the middle which keeps us pretty warm—a *Feld Ofen*. On the table is a Madonna of painted plaster—rather good—looted by one of the servants from the ruins of the church, I suppose. We also have an arm-chair with a broken spring—very comfortable, and a cane chair—both collected from cellars. Very safe position so far as one can judge, but not a good place for writing letters. My servant went off three days ago to munitions, and I have instead an elderly gentleman (probably 35) of charming manners, who used to cook for us.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

I have just been offered a musketry course, and think I have evaded it. Don't expect any letters at present.

*March 31*

Nothing has been doing to-day except hail-storms, and I've sat all day in the tent, mostly putting wood on the *Feld Ofen*. It's too horribly miry to want a walk: also it's not worth getting wet when one hasn't a change of clothes. I believe we move on a bit to-morrow, and I'm afraid letters will be sparse and long on the way, so you mustn't expect much in that line. It's not bad here at all: my main objection is that it's still too cold to sleep properly. One wakes up frizzed at intervals. But I suppose every day is a step further from winter, even if it isn't a step nearer summer. I don't think the men get so much of the cold as they are squeezed into tents like peas in a pod, and so warm one another even when wet through. Whether that makes for health, however, is doubtful, I should think. I would give a good deal for leave, but there seems not the slightest chance of it.

I return the Frenchman's letter: he certainly writes very well. It's the lack of self-consciousness, I imagine. Send him my congratulations on his Croix de Guerre when you write. I don't know what the attack was, but evidently a good deal east of where they were.

*April 1.* Bustling off for billets.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

*April 4.*

Just another line to say very fitly. We are in another village—farm kitchen with ceiling but no roof, and a large brick fireplace on which we burn rafters and suchlike—the best fires I've seen in France. We sleep on boards slung halfway down the wall and the servants sleep underneath. The country ahead comparatively unspoilt; but every village bashed in completely—not a cottage left in places three times the size of Standon. Quite heavy snow last night, but the billet is nice and warm, unlike most places we've been in. Went for a walk with B. yesterday to see our front.

I've got your beautiful cake, and it's more than half eaten at the first go. It's very fine and good. Shortbread from Frdk. and a parcel from my mother arrived at same time, which is unusual but most useful, as we get further from our base of supplies.

Haven't time to send more this time.

*April 5.*

It's quite a fine day and I believe we move up a bit. Edith's parcel has arrived, very good, please thank her very much for it; and the cheroots, also very good, as is the pipe and the sweets and

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

the handkerchief which you sent with that particularly good cake, which vanished away within twenty-four hours, large as it was.

Didn't you ask if I had had any conversation with the C.O.? Well, I haven't. Every one seems to think him extremely competent. He strikes me as far more able than any one I have met yet.

I had a nice ride yesterday over country almost unshelled on the Coy. horse, which has been clipped and goes like the wind on turf—quite a different beast from what it is on the road.

We have been most comfortable in this billet, with a fire almost too hot to sit by.

Yes, I got 'The Sergeant,'<sup>1</sup> but haven't heard it sung yet.

*Easter Sunday, April 8.*

I suppose you have been to the Early Service, haven't you? And is it a fine day as it is here, after a beastje one yesterday?

We are in most luxurious quarters—more or less at the Front—a farm stables practically uninjured by the retiring Boches. It has not been clent for ages, but the 'nures' [manures] are nice and soft, and I have just slept on a spring mattress gathered in from the adjoining ruins. We also have tables

<sup>1</sup> A musical setting of his poem *The Sergeant*, by a stranger, Mr F. G. Ladds, who, having read the poem in the newspaper, had written asking to be allowed to set it to music.

## LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

and chairs dotted among the nure-heaps, and a small artificial Christmas tree, evidently left by the Boches. Our last shelter was not so good, being the ruins of the Manse in another village. The snow and wind blew through it and the chimney beam caught fire and threatened to bring the chimbley on top of us, so we had to go cold—which it was. There is no exaggeration about the state these villages are left in. The Boches cut out a brick or two at intervals in every house wall, insert explosives, and bring the whole thing down, so that often you can sit under the gables as they rest on the ground with the whole house and all the contents ground to dust below.

The advantage to us of this destruction is that everywhere now there is fuel—broken beams and laths and doors and chairs with which one can mostly keep big fires going. The military advantage to them is less than nothing.

I am glad America is coming in. I suppose there is no doubt now. If so, the Boches must feel themselves coming very close to the pit they digged for others, unless their submarines can work miracles.

Send your *téléphoniste* my congratulations on his Croix de Guerre. He has what every soldier must desire—the recognition of his valour.

I think it will be summer soon, and perhaps the war will end this year and I shall see my Pretty One again.

## **LETTERS TO HIS WIFE**

**WAR OFFICE.**

Deeply regret to inform you that 2nd Lieut.  
R. E. Vernède, Rifle Brigade, died of wounds,  
April ninth. The Army Council express their  
sympathy.—Secretary, War Office.

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